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SPACE stories

DECEMBER 1952 25c

FEATURING

PLANET OF THE DAMNED

By JACK VANCE

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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A THRILLING PUBLICATION VOL. 1, NO. 2 DECEMBER, 1952

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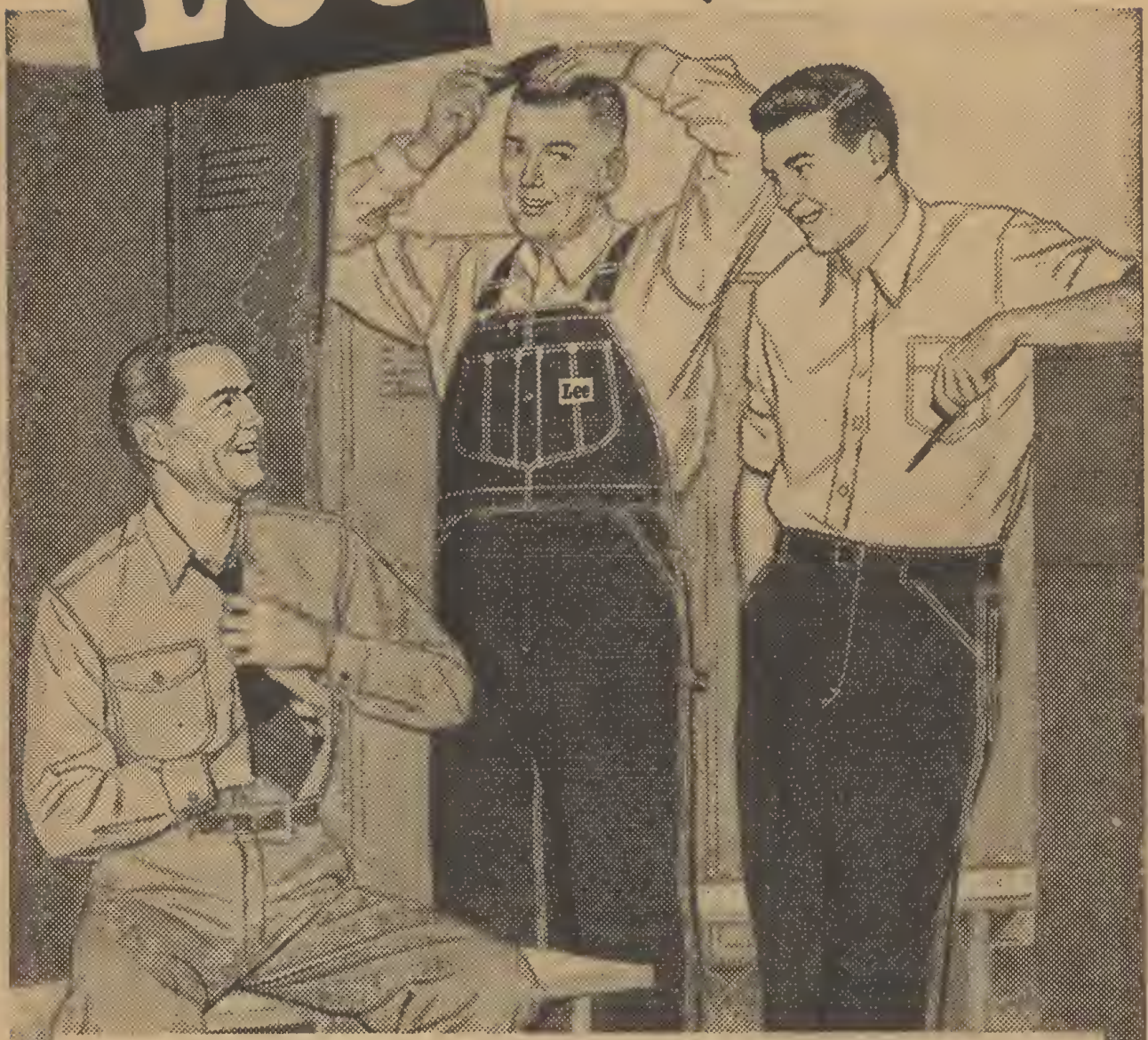

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FLASHES FROM OUR READERS

First Comments on Our First Issue!

AS THIS issue goes to press, the first number of SPACE STORIES has been on the newstands only a few days. Yet by air mail and carrier pigeon a few of the faithful rushed us the usual kind comments which have so often graced the pages of our companion triplets, STARTLING STORIES, THRILLING WONDER STORIES and FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE.

Says Hank Moskowitz, the sage of Three Bridges, New Jersey, and faithful defender of Cap Future:

Mines Dear Sam, the first issue of SPACE STORIES is in hand—well in hand, I should say.

You know why I like space opera so much? No, it's not Captain Future. Well, not just him. Here's why. The coldly mental story, the complex parable, and the tale of social significance are, in their way, cold. No color. But chiefly no human emotion. Try and get Tica's emotions in a coldly mental story. Try and get Bennie's youthful emotions in a complex parable. There is no such story which can be better than a story of people, of emotion. A good story of just plain people is unbeatable.

I hope you have nothing against a plain, old-fashioned review, do you?

Man Of Two Worlds has been done before. Remember the *Sea-Kings Of Mars?* But Walton did a competent job. A fair story.

The three short stories were all right, even good.

But now we come to the two items which, in my opinion, were alone worth the two bits. *The Invaders* and *Big-Top On Jupiter*. I can't quite decide which was the best. The former, written by Gordon R. Dickson, had a great deal of nicely worked-in human emotion. The latter, written by Noel Loomis, had a very interesting background. A circus. How about another story of Bennie?

Will wait patiently for the Vance story next issue. And impatiently for the Brackett novel in the third issue. Needless to ask, will there be a letter column? Thanks, that's what I figured. That seems to be about it. Until next issue, I remain yours STFantically.

Howard Curtis of New York emotes:

Space Opera? There should be a better word to describe BIG-TOP ON JUPITER. I expected the worst in bang-bang, instead got a story so rich in quaint, colorful "other worlds" feeling that it would have been a treat in any of your mags. You've got a customer, Sam.

And says Madeline Hendrix of Cranberry Lake, N. J.:

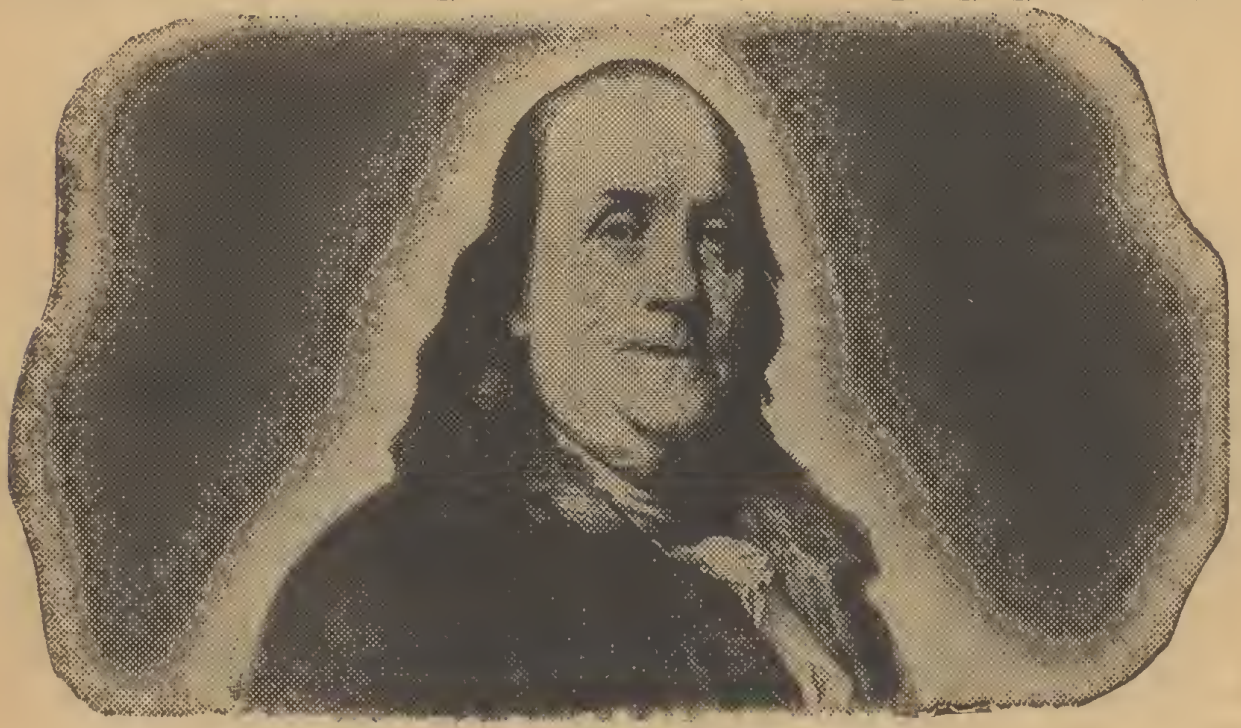
A fine problem you've handed us, Sam. It was bad enough with the terrible twins, when they alternated month to month and there was a mad battle to see who got to read which first. Then FSM went bimonthly and we were busy shelling out quarters to get them all. And now SPACE STORIES—yipe! The worst of it is we can't afford to miss any of them because tucked in with all the crud is likely to be a gem of a story, just as in the letter columns amongst all the yak yak is likely to be one letter worth the price of admission alone.

I know when you buy stories in the quantities you now need them you have to buy some stuff you'd rather be dead than run. And you've got to parcel out the real McCoy economically. Oh yes, Sam, we fen have hearts, even if it doesn't seem like it when we start banging you over the head for running "confessions of a space man." But the Walton isn't bad if you like purple prose and Dickson, methinks, is a boy who will develop. Then we'll be looking forward to the Vance and did someone whisper that a Brackettale was on the way? Sam, you've got my quarters mortgaged for life!

And that's only the beginning. If readers run true to form we expect to be deluged with letters. Watch for them.

—The Editor

WHAT SECRET POWER DID THIS MAN POSSESS?



Benjamin Franklin
(A Rosicrucian)

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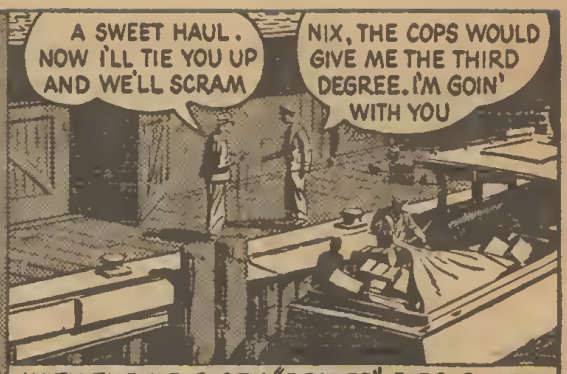
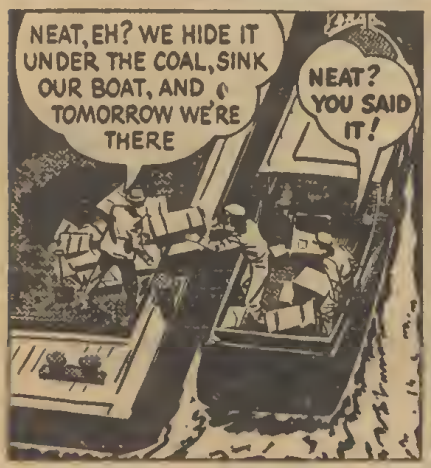
BERT OUTSMARTS RIVER PIRATES WHEN...

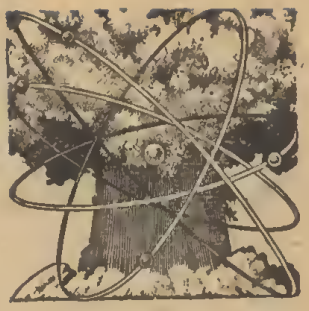


WITH THE HELP OF A "BRIBED" PIER GUARD, THE RIVER PIRATES PREPARE TO MAKE OFF WITH A PRIZE HAUL...



What's New in

A-BOMBS?



By LEWIS ISLAND

IT IS believed that the first test of gunpowder on the battlefield was in 1346. The English fired their few crude cannons in the Battle of Crecy. Thunder roared, lightning flashed, torrents of rain fell, and there was an eclipse of the sun.

Over six hundred years later, on April 22, 1952, the nuclear reaction from which solar energy emanates had been harnessed, and was first tested under battlefield conditions.

There was no thunder, lightning or rain—if there had been, the plane dropping the A-bomb would have been grounded and the test postponed.

There was no eclipse of the sun—on the contrary, the power of the sun itself was loosed, high in the air over Yucca Flat, Nevada.

Gunpowder Holds its Own

The "art of war" advances slowly. It was two hundred years after the Battle of Crecy that cannon and gunpowder were efficient enough to be generally used on battlefields. The bow and arrow held its own until the sixteenth century. And gunpowder may well be holding its own in the twenty-second century, if, as some scientists believe, the use of atomic weapons on the battlefield against an entrenched enemy will be of no great advantage.

The use of such "baby A-bombs" is something like breaking a firecracker in the middle before igniting it, to make it fizzle, according to Dr. David R. Inglis, who worked at Los Alamos during the war. In the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, he points out that the critical mass of fissionable material needed for a small bomb must be about the same as that needed for a big one. Since there is an acknowledged scarcity of uranium 235 and plutonium, a bomb small enough to be fired by artillery would be wasteful of fissionable material.

However, so little is known of the actual effects of atomic weapons on the battlefield that tests must be made. The Army has already gone into production of two guided missiles capable of carrying atomic warheads, a subcommittee of the House of Representatives recently revealed. One is to be fired by artillery, the other is for anti-aircraft use.

The "Nike"

A radar-guided missle called "Nike," for the Greek goddess of victory, has already been tested at White Sands. Taking off from earth, it can track and destroy an airplane flying ten miles away and at six miles altitude.

The Army's objective is to produce a missile capable of destroying aircraft flying at any altitude up to fifteen miles.

Going from "baby A-bombs" to monsters, one of the tests this year is expected to produce twenty-five times as much power as the bombs used at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

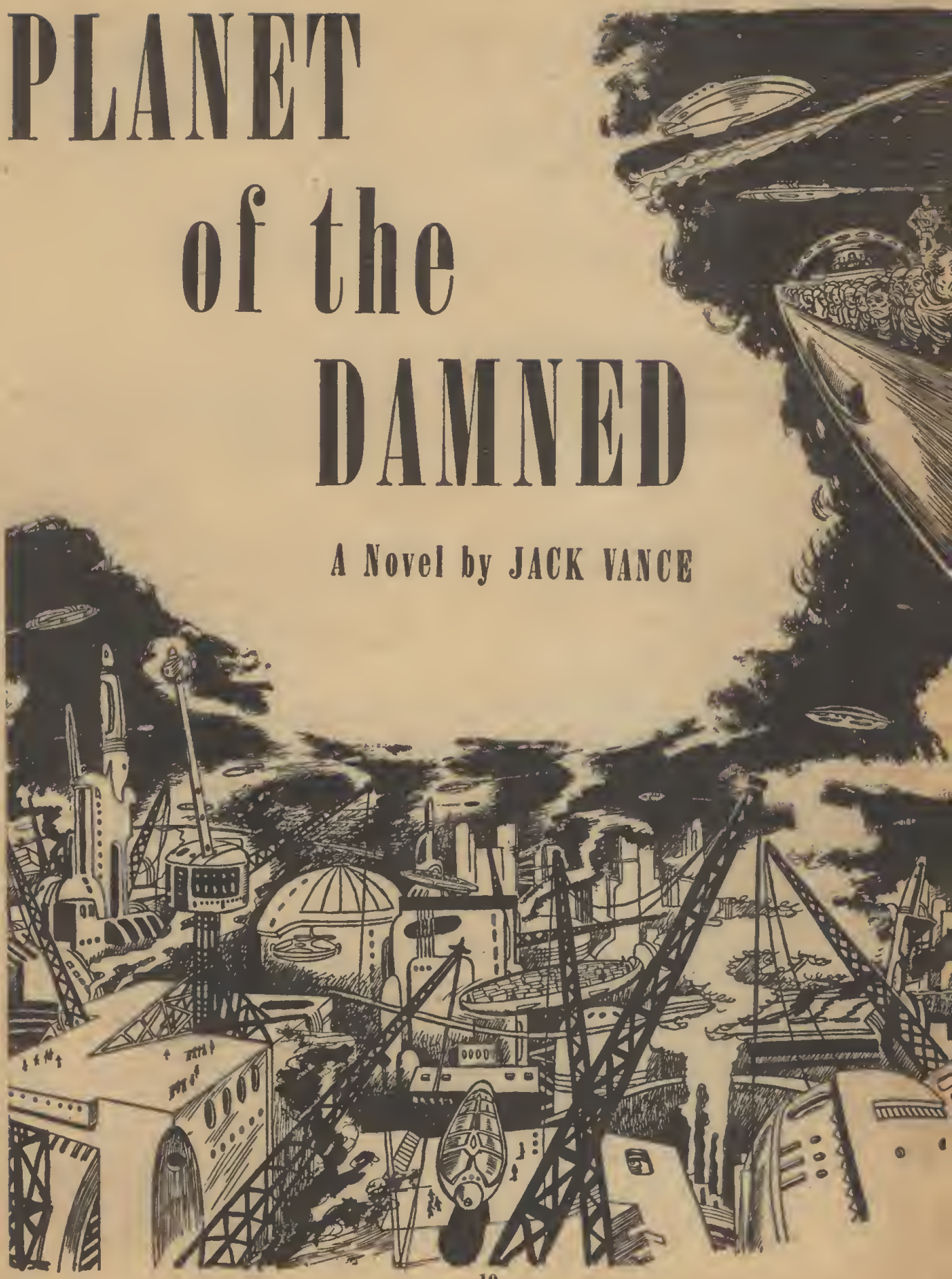
There were 135,000 casualties at Hiroshima. Multiplying this by twenty-five, it seems that the best available weapon of 1952, if dropped in the right place at the right time, could kill or injure some three and a third million people.

Let's *talk* it out, huh, fellers?

The Baby Bombs Have Grown Up to—Monsters!

PLANET of the DAMNED

A Novel by JACK VANCE



It was a mechanized inferno. Barch sensed flaring lights, gigantic objects in motion, monster shapes

I

MARKEL, the Lekthwan, occupied a strange and beautiful dwelling on the highest crag of Mount Whitney, consisting of six domes, three minarets, and a wide terrace. The domes were formed of almost clear crystal, the minarets were white porcelain-stuff, the surrounding terrace was blue glass, and in turn was surrounded by a rococo balustrade with blue and white spiral stanchions.

To Earther minds, Markel was like his dwell-

He had only this to offer to these slaves on the

prison world: Blood, Sweat, Fears—and Freedom!

ing—beautiful, incomprehensible, disturbing. His skin shone lustrous gold; his features were fine, hard, exotic in their spacing. He wore soft black garments: tight breeches, sandals resting on two inches of air, a cloak which fell into dramatic shapes apparently of its own volition.

Markel welcomed no strangers, made no appointments, but contrived to conduct a large volume of business with small effort. He employed a dozen agents, conferring daily with each via Lekthwan three-dimensional television, which produced the illusion of face-to-face discussion. He occasionally flew abroad in his air-boat, occasionally received visitors from other Lekthwan domes.

His two Earther attendants, Claude Darran and Roy Barch found him formal, courteous, painfully patient. Some of their duties were familiar enough, with parallels from their own experience: washing down the terrace, polishing the air-boat; others involved apparently irrational operations. When they made mistakes, Markel repeated his instructions, while Darran and Barch reacted each to his temperament, Darran ruefully apologetic, Barch listening with grim concentration.

Markel's psychological attitude was perhaps as much due to preoccupation as any innate conviction of superiority. On occasion he extended himself to be gracious. Noticing a mark on Barch's chin, he asked, "How did you do that?"

"Cut myself shaving," said Barch.

Markel's eyebrows flickered in surprise. He entered the dome, returning a few minutes later with a flask of clear liquid. "Wipe this over your face and you'll never need to shave again."

Barch looked dubiously at the bottle. "I've heard of stuff like this. It takes your face along with the beard."

Markel shook his head politely. "You need not worry in this case." He turned away, then paused. "A ship will be arriving today; my family will be aboard. We will receive them formally at eleven o'clock. Is that clear?"

"Very well," said Barch.

"You understand the landing operation?"

"Perfectly," said Barch.

Markel nodded, continued around the terrace, the space under his sandals giving him a springing striding gait. Barch went to the quarters he shared with Darran, cautiously applied the depilatory to his face. When he felt his cheeks, the stubble had disappeared.

Darran came in. "There's going to be a shake-up. The old man's family is arriving today—a wife, two daughters. Now everybody toes the mark, Markel included."

Barch nodded. "I know. He asked me if I remembered how to fold down the balustrade. Also he said 'formal'—that means the monkey-suits." He glanced sourly at his skin-tight green coveralls with the blue jacket. "I feel like a ballet dancer in that outfit." He handed Darran the bottle. "Here, make yourself beautiful. It's depilatory, removes your beard—a present from Markel. If we had ten gallons, we'd be millionaires."

Darran weighed the flask in his hand. "Some kind of hint? Maybe we're looking seedy."

"If it was deodorant, I might think so."

Darran looked at his wrist-watch. "Ten-thirty; we'd better get into our uniforms."

WHEN they arrived at the landing stage, Markel already stood by the balustrade. He inspected them briefly, then, pulling the peak-visored cap lower over his eyes, turned to look out over the panorama to the south.

Moments passed. Down from the sky floated a glistening ball, striped red, gold, blue and silver. It expanded swiftly, the stripes flashing and whirling. Barch and Darran bent over the balustrade, felt for the locks. The balustrade collapsed into the blue glass, and a blast of cold air blew across the terrace.

The space-ball loomed overhead like a

mountain, the stripes boiling and melting like the colors of a soap bubble. It pressed close, locked to the terrace.

The hull broke open into an arched portal. Markel stood like a statue; Barch and Darran stared.

Five Lekthwans came forth: two women, two men, a little girl who ran gaily across the terrace. Markel cried out a greeting, lifted the child high with one golden arm, with the other embraced the two women. There were a few moments of staccato Lekthwan conversation, then Markel set down the child, led the party into the near rotunda.

From the portal slid a dozen crates, cushioned on two inches of air, like Markel's sandals. Barch and Darran guided them one at a time to the service dome.

The portal closed, the colors in the hull boiled furiously. The space-ball drifted back from the landing stage, spun off into the east.

Darran and Barch, left alone on the terrace, watched it dwindle to a spot of color.

"Well, that's that," said Darran. "Now we've seen the big shot's family." He waited, but Barch made no comment. They lifted the balustrade back into place. "The older woman must be his wife," Darran went on reflectively, "and the two girls, his daughters."

"Cute little kid," said Barch.

Darran turned him a quizzical glance. "How about the other one?"

Barch bent over a crate. "Why argue? She's beautiful." He glanced briefly toward the rotunda. "She's still something off another planet, strange as a fish."

"She looks nineteen or twenty," Darran said ruminatively. "Of course, with Lekthwans you can't tell. Maybe she's forty."

"What's the difference?"

"No difference."

Barch grinned. "At night all cats are gray, so the saying goes."

"Sure," said Darran. "After all, they are human. What did Shylock say? 'If you cut me I bleed—' "

Barch said gruffly, "Go recite to the Lekthwans; they need indoctrination, not me."

Darran shrugged. "We're making a good thing out of the Lekthwans. They pay through the nose for everything we sell them. They've advanced us hundreds of years. We're building space-ships with principles of science we never even dreamed of. We've cut the death-rate with their medicine—"

"It's not our science, nor our medicine."

"It works, doesn't it?"

"It never grew on Earth, it's not good transplanting that alien stuff."

Darran regarded him curiously. "If you don't like the Lekthwans, how come you're up here working for Markel?"

Barch turned him a speculative glance. "I could ask you the same question."

"I'm here because I might learn something."

Barch abruptly turned away. "Guys like you are too easy-going. You want to be nice."

"Sure. It's nice to be nice."

"Are the Lekthwans nice to you? Maybe they come down to visit your house, buy you a beer?" Barch snorted. "Not on your life. They're Lekthwans, we're the peasants."

"Give them time," said Darran. "They're a long way ahead, we're strangers to each other. They're decent enough—maybe a little stand-offish."

Barch's bright hazel eyes glittered like coals. "And in a few years—what then? We were doing pretty well as Earthers, making progress every year. Home-grown, native, natural progress. Do you know what's going to happen to us? In those few more years you talk about, we'll be through. We won't be any good as Lekthwans—they won't have us—and we'll be a hell of a lot worse as Earthers."

Darran gravely tapped Barch's chest. "I'll tell you something. You'll never win a prize for optimism."

"Show me something to be optimistic about," growled Barch. "I keep thinking of a picture I once saw, a Zulu chief in his best clothes. A plug hat, a swallow-tail coat and underneath—a grass belly-band. That's what we're getting from the Lekthwans: the plug hat and the old coat."

"You've got your opinion," said Darran, "I've got mine." He bent over a crate, gave it a shove toward the door. "Let's be realistic. The Lekthwans are here. We can't turn back the clock. Why should we want to? We've got a lot to gain."

"Only what they decide is good for us."

Darran shook his head. "Earthers at Lekthwan schools learn anything they want to."

"First you've got to know the language."

Darran laughed. "Do you expect them to run their schools in English? . . . I'd give a lot to go to their planet." Darran laughed cheerfully. "You're looking through the wrong end of the telescope. Maybe you ought to go to Lekthwa yourself. It might give you a different slant."

"If I go to Lekthwa, I'll go to learn something pretty basic, and that's how to ease these gold-plate snobs off of Earth."

II

TKZ MAERKL-ELAKSD—Markel, as the Earthers called him—awaiting his wife Tcher, his daughters Komeitk Lelianr and Sia Spedz, stood looking through the wall of his south salon across the great California deserts. He wore no cloak; afternoon sunlight coppered the gold of his skin.

Behind him sounded the quick pad of feet; Sia Spedz came running out barefoot, wearing a diaphane diaper with white pompons at each hip. Her hair was finest platinum floss, burnished and waxed, parted in the middle, flared playfully over the ears. She stood on tiptoe by the wall looking out over the view. "Where are the other domes? Are we all alone?"

Markel stroked her head. "No, there are agencies all around Earth."

"And always on the mountain tops?"

"Yes, that's how we secure isolation and privacy." He turned as his wife and his second daughter appeared, wearing simple white kirtles. Tcher, the mother, dressed her hair sleek as a silver cap against her head. Komeitk Lelianr, the daughter, combed hers into a high tuft, like a silver flame.

Markel brought forth couches of half-living white foam. "And your voyage, was it pleasant?"

Komeitk Lelianr grimaced. Tcher said, "Everywhere but at Great Dark Cloud. A Klau web forced us to stop."

Markel stirred uneasily in his seat. "And then?"

"A boat clamped alongside, intending to send aboard a search party."

"But why? Why?"

"We were told. There is a rumor that a dozen Lenape escaped from Magarak and the Klau would not have them win back to Lenau."

"No, a great defeat for the Klau." For "defeat" Markel used an untranslatable Lekthwan word conveying overtones of angry retreat, loss of face, diminution of moral vitality. Murmured Markel, "They become intolerable . . . And then?"

"The ship master behaved with enormous dignity. He commenced a sight and sound broadcast of the Klau anxiety, and in five minutes they withdrew."

Markel conveyed his understanding through the complex Lekthwan eyebrow, eye and eyelash mood-language, and by the same method indicated a change in subject. He turned to Sia Spedz: "Tell me, how goes your gain of life-experience?"

The girl wriggled her toes. "Everyone commends my ability. I have learned eleven characterizations and three optionals, which are: Smiling Sunrise, Playful Kitten and The Solitary One."

"Excellent."

Tcher said with whimsical pride, "She can walk twenty feet high on her sandals, and she went alone out around Mirska-Moon in a day-boat."

"On Earth she must be more cautious," said Markel. "Lekthwans are not universally popular."

Sia Spedz asked in puzzlement, "Why is that? Do we not help them, do we not train them at our Lekthwan schools?"

Markel smiled quietly. "The Earthers have long considered themselves unique in the universe, and the coming of the Lekthwans has been a blow to their pride."

Sia Spedz continued doubtfully. "Also I know all the Lekthwan reigns, dynasties and realms, starting with King Phalder in the Proto-History."

"Down on the plains of Earth, you will find natives in roughly the same stage of culture."

"That is more to the interest of Lelianr."

Markel turned to his other daughter. "Time fleets like a meteor streak; I cannot believe that you have finished your first curricula. And now?"

KOMEITK LELIANR spoke in the Sedate Counsel characterization. "I think in several directions. Primitive anthropology concerns me, and also food research. Last month I designed a very pleasant sugar, of which several tons were produced and distributed."

Markel laughed. "If you would discover new and exotic flavors, test some of the Earther food."

Komeitk Lelianr screwed her face into a wry grimace. "Animal tissues."

"They also consume much plant matter."

"Life devouring life, nevertheless."

"An intrinsic immorality which I believe goes unrecognized. However, the race can synthesize only the simplest carbohydrates."

"I suppose they must feed themselves somehow."

"The Earthers are not entirely savage; indeed, if you pursue your interest in proto-culture you will come upon some surprising achievements."

Komeitk Lelianr nodded. "I have also considered a career in the creation of art-spectacles."

"Last month," said Tcher, "she completed a beautiful work in the Empire style, which won commendation in the Arianum."

Markel's characterization indicated doubt. "It is a career with potentialities for great fulfillment or equally intense disappointment."

"Depending on the creator's vitality and largeness of spirit."

"Perhaps you are so gifted. However I hate to see you chancing the composure and happiness of your life."

Komeitk Lelianr assumed a characterization of whimsical recklessness. "Success is the same in any field, and failure is failure."

"You would be most secure in food research. Primitive anthropology drains the emotion, especially if one fails to control his empathy."

Komeitk Lelianr shrugged. "There is still time for me to decide, and I need not limit myself to rigid specialization."

Sia Spedz cried, "Look, two Earthers on the terrace!"

Markel changed his characterization. "They are my servants—both bright young men."

"They are not quite as I had pictured Earthers," Komeitk Lelianr remarked thoughtfully.

Tcher said, "The darker of the two seems more agreeable, the other has weight on his soul."

"As a matter of fact," said Markel, "Roy has little liking for the Lekthwans."

Tcher shook her head. "If the Klau had come to Earth in our place, then he would have grounds for resentment."

"He has grounds, of a rather personal nature. His father was a scientist, and Roy's ambition was to follow in his father's footsteps. From earliest youth he trained himself in the accepted tech-

niques. Then the Lekthwans came, and overnight the entire effort of his life became nothing. Much of what he had learned was inaccurate, the remainder in the light of Lekthwan knowledge was either obsolete or rudimentary. Roy became very bitter."

Komeitk Lelianr studied Barch's back. "Understandably."

"Why does he not study on Lekthwa?" demanded Sia Spedz.

Markel considered Barch and Darran. "He may approach the idea. At the moment all he sees is long years of further study, where he must start learning with children the age of Spedz."

"The other," said Tcher, "indeed has a much kinder expression. What is his name?"

"That is Claude. He is more practical than Roy, and on the whole, less emotional. I plan to include him in the next group to Lekthwa."

"And Roy?"

"So far he has shown no inclination to leave Earth."

Markel's two guests entered the salon. He rose to his feet. "You have refreshed yourselves?"

"We have bathed and rested. The view from your dome is magnificent."

Markel nodded. "I consider Earth among the more beautiful worlds. Have you noticed the valley to the southeast, the hundred soft colors?"

"Beautiful."

"Beautiful, and also deadly. Indeed the Earthers call it 'Death Valley'."

III

BARCH and Darran cooked for themselves, with supplies delivered every Saturday by helicopter. By and large their duties were nominal, and after washing down the terrace, their mornings were free. During this time Darran studied the Lekthwan grammar texts and tape recordings that Markel had placed at his disposal, while Barch read or moodily sunned himself.

The arrival of Markel's family disturbed the routine. On the morning after her arrival, Sia Spedz made friends with Darran, asking him why he wore shoes, rather than air-sandals.

Darran's answer was completely honest. "In the first place, I own no air-sandals. In the second, I'd fall flat on my face if I tried them."

"But it's not hard," said Sia Spedz, speaking English with a precise accent, "so long as you stay close to the ground."

"How high can a person walk?"

Sia Spedz looked into the sky. "A man could walk up to the moon, if he were skillful enough. I can walk twenty feet from the ground."

"I don't understand. Why should it be easier close to the ground?"

"The force comes out like a pyramid. Close to the ground the base is broad. The higher you walk, the narrower becomes the column you walk on, so much the harder to balance."

"Ah," said Darran. "Why don't you make more powerful sandals, so that even when you walk high there would be a wide pyramid under your feet?"

"I don't know . . . I think because then there would be no fun in learning."

"I thought you were a practical race," said Darran.

"Not entirely. The Klau are completely practical. Everything is planned for exact use, whether it makes people happy or not. There is no gaiety on the Klau worlds."

"So? Who are the Klau?"

"Enemies. Terrible men, with eyes like red stars." But Sia Spedz was more interested in her skill with the sandals. "Watch." She climbed into the air as if she were mounting stairs, ran gaily back and forth over Darran's head. "Now I'm going higher."

"Be careful!" Darran walked back and forth below her with arms outstretched.

"This is as high as I like to go," said Sia Spedz. "Up here it's very shaky."

"You'd better come down. You make me nervous."

She rejoined him. "Why don't you ask

Markel to give you a pair of sandals?"

Darran shrugged. "It's not polite to ask for gifts."

"If you don't make your wants known, they go unrecognized."

Darran laughed. "I thought you weren't a practical race."

"Perhaps we are after all. In any event I'll give you a pair of sandals myself."

"You'll get spanked for giving away your father's best shoes."

Sia Spedz giggled. "That's a funny thing to say."

Barch had been leaning on the balustrade. "I think he's funny too. He knows all kinds of games. Get him to teach you hopscotch."

"Hopscotch?" Sia Spedz looked at Darran. "What is that?"

"It's a game little Earth girls play."

"Do you know how to play?"

Darran scratched his cheek. "Roy plays a lot better than I do."

"No," said Barch, "you won yesterday."

"You show me, Claude."

Barch sat down on a bench. "I'll see that there's no cheating." He reached under him, pulled out Darran's Lekthwan Primer. He flipped it open, and glanced at the introduction.

"The Lekthwan language," read the book, "sounds harsh and consonantal to Earth ears—a matter of which perhaps deserves explanation. To begin with, the Lekthwan language embraces a tremendous vocabulary, with sometimes a hundred synonyms for one basic idea. In consequence there is no need for circumlocution, and Lekthwan speech is notable for the logical simplicity of its declarative forms.

"This characteristic has led, in the evolution of the language, to the extensive use of contractions and abbreviations, resulting in a preponderance of consonant sounds.

"A further peculiarity of the Lekthwan language is the fact that each word may have a number of different shadings, depending upon the 'characterization' assumed by the person speaking, or even the person spoken to. There are almost a hundred of these characterizations, of which sixty-two are termed *basic*. Every mature person is familiar with the basic characterizations, and with most of the remaining optionals. The Lekthwan indicates the characterization in which he speaks by play of eyes, eyebrows and eyelashes. In crude analogy the characterizations might be likened to the emotion-masks of the ancient Greek dramatists.

"It is evident from the above that the Lekthwan language is exquisitely subtle, flexible and difficult of mastery. This present course, therefore, is designed to acquaint the student with Lekthwan-basic, with an elementary vocabulary from the most literal and least fanciful of the characterizations, i.e.: No. 2, the so-called *Statistician*."

BARCH tossed the book back to the bench, mentally labeling the Lekthwan language a life-time job in itself . . . The Lekthwan children seemed to absorb it easily enough. He watched Sia Spedz, engrossed in Darran's explanation. How many of these characterizations was she able to use? A bright-looking kid. Thousands of years of natural—and possibly eugenic—selection had no doubt increased the intelligence of the race. Intelligence and—as if to offer an illustration, Komeitk Lelianr stepped out on the terrace—intelligence and beauty.

Covertly he watched her as she leaned upon the balustrade. The Lekthwans, he knew, felt no self-consciousness in connection with nudity. Komeitk Lelianr now wore only a short skirt and air-sandals. Barch felt the warmth rising in his body. A stranger, a creature of a far world . . . Still how wonderful, how alive, how graceful, how clean. . . .

She turned quickly, as if she had felt his eyes. Barch looked away guiltily, then after a moment glanced back, to where she now stood with her back to the balustrade.

She was appraising him. Barch thought bitterly, I'm the first Earther savage she's had a close look at.

She said politely, "I see that you study our language. Do you find it difficult?"

She meant to be pleasant, thought Barch. The college girl interviewing the Zulu buck. Being nice. Barch rose to his feet. "I don't find it difficult because I'm not working at it."

She said nothing, gazing at him with embarrassing intensity.

Barch said, "At first glance it looks complicated. I imagine that it's a remarkable vehicle of expression, if a stranger could ever digest it."

Her face showed interest. Barch thought angrily, she probably expected me to grunt like a bear.

Komeitk Lelianr inquired, "Aren't you the one who doesn't like us?"

Barch's eyes narrowed in surprise. He said carefully, "I don't object to Lekthwans as human beings."

"And that's all you feel?"

"I don't think that Earth will ultimately benefit from their presence."

Komeitk Lelianr asked, "What's your name?"

"Roy Barch." And almost rudely, he asked, "What's yours?"

"Komeitk Lelianr."

"Mmph . . . What does it mean?"

She laughed. "A meaning? Why should it have a meaning?"

"It seems reasonable that an advanced people—as you profess yourselves to be—would use your names for indices, to indicate your profession, or home, or some kind of identification."

"Tsk," said Komeitk Lelianr. Her eyebrows moved in what Barch recognized as a change of characterization. "What a terrible idea: regimented, uniform. You suffer misapprehensions about us."

"No less than your misapprehensions about us," growled Barch.

Komeitk Lelianr grinned. "Does your name mean anything?"

"No."

"I'd like to ask a favor of you," she said.

"You don't need to ask favors. I'm on the payroll; all you need to do is give orders."

"I'm very much interested in the psychology of other-world races. Would you object if I made a psychometric test of you?"

"Ah," said Barch bitterly. "So now it comes out. I'm to figure as one of your case-histories . . . Typical Zulu buck. Perhaps you'd like a photograph of me in my war-bonnet? Or maybe recording me in my native chants?"

"That would be wonderful," said Komeitk Lelianr. "But— do you have your regalia here?"

Barch stared at her. She was unquestionably serious. "We're going to throw a combination cannibal-feed and voodoo orgy tomorrow night on Sunset Boulevard. If you sneak quietly over in your air-sandals, you'll get some really sensational stuff."

Her eyebrows flickered in interest. "Indeed, I would like to visit one of these rites."

"Well," said Barch thoughtfully, "you'd have to disguise yourself. If you powdered over your skin, you probably could pass for a good case of sun-tan . . . Also you'd have to wear a few more clothes. That's a provocative outfit you've got on now."

"I'm not sure I understand. Why do you say that?"

Barch looked away. "I don't know . . . Yes, I do too."

"Then how should I dress myself?"

He looked sidewise at her. "Are you serious?"

"Of course. Where is this Sunset Boulevard?"

"I could take you," said Barch thoughtfully.

"That would be very helpful."

Barch calculated. "How will we get there?"

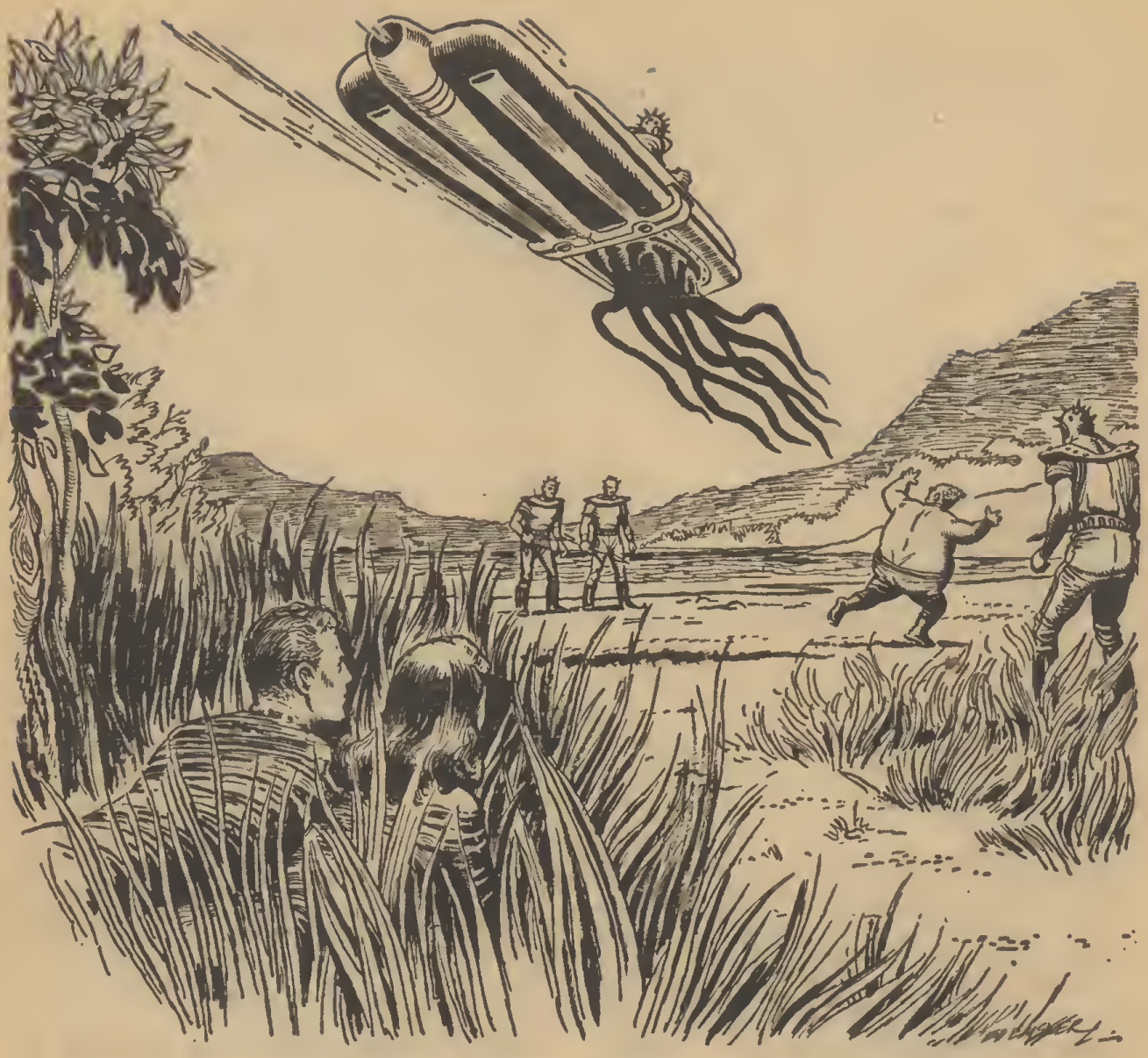
"In the air-boat. How else?"

"Your father won't kick?"

"Kick?"

"Object?"

"Of course not." She added soberly,



The fat man ran frantically, panting and groaning

"You must understand, I possibly intend to make anthropology my career."

Barch nodded. "Very well, that's a date."

"But what sort of costume must I wear?"

"Anything that covers you from shoulder to knee. If you combed your hair back I suppose you could pass for platinum blonde. . . ."

IV

DARRAN came in while Barch was knotting his tie. "Where do you think you're going? Why the preparations?"

"Got a date with the old man's daughter."

Darren sat down. "So? Hopscotch with Spedz maybe, along the north terrace?"

"No, sir. Catch-as-catch-can with the cute one, up to San Francisco."

Darran leaned back limply. "This is fantastic."

"Not when you get the background. She's interested in picturesque native customs; she thinks she's going to Los Angeles to see a human sacrifice, or a Dionysian fertility rite."

Darran sighed. "What some guys won't do to get a date . . . And where are you taking her? Or is she taking you?"

"Darned if I know. She'd probably enjoy the Embarcadero saloons or Chutes at the Beach." He made a wry face. "I have my pride too."

"She'd be bored at the Fairmont."

"I should think so. No blood-letting, no colorful rituals."

"There's always Hambone Kelly's."

"True," said Barch. "There's always Hambone Kelly's." He buttoned his jacket. "Well, here I go."

"Good luck," said Darran. "Don't get in trouble."

Barch turned him a cool stare. "What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing," said Darran mildly. "You're a truculent son of a gun . . . You must have something on your mind."

Barch pushed out upon the terrace and stood looking into the night. His hands were clammy and tense; Darran had hit close to the truth. This was like going out on the first date of his life, only more so.

He walked slowly around the terrace, stopped near the main dome. Inside were Lekthwans, from a far planet; did they expect him to knock on the door, call for the girl? Or should he wait outside until she appeared? He made an angry sound through his teeth; where was his self-respect? He was as good as any of them; this was Earth, by God, they'd go by Earth customs.

He strode belligerently up to the dome, then came to a halt. Knock, certainly. Or ring a bell. But where?

Light glimmered through the opacity; Barch backed away. Komeitk Lelianr came quickly out upon the terrace, followed by Markel and Sia Spedz running like a terrier.

Markel spoke in Lekthwan. "I imagine you'll be disappointed . . . Of course there's no reason why you shouldn't investigate."

Sia Spedz said, "I'd like to go too."

"One anthropologist in the family is enough," said Markel. He turned to Barch. "See that she does nothing to get into trouble, Roy."

"Tsk." Komeitk Lelianr sauntered down the terrace. "Come, Roy."

Barch, mustering his dignity, followed to where the air-boat floated.

Komeitk Lelianr ducked into the air-boat, Barch followed. She wore a white and black one-piece suit, like a harlequin costume. She would be conspicuous, but would not necessarily draw a crowd.

Inside the boat floated a silver ball pierced by a black rod. Komeitk Lelianr took the ball; the car moved off into the sky. "Now," she said, "which way?"

The first thing, thought Barch, was to get the affair on its proper footing. "Show me how to run this contraption."

She turned her head, her eyebrows raised in surprise. For a moment Barch thought she might politely ignore him; then she handed him the silver ball. "This—" she touched the black rod "—represents the perpendicular axis of the boat. Tilt the ball, the boat tilts. Move the ball up, you initiate a cumulative upward acceleration, which can only be countered by moving the ball down. The black rod is the speed control. The farther you depress it, the faster you go. To brake, you push from below."

"That's simple enough . . . Where's the height indicator?"

"There." She pointed to a series of angular black shapes moving along a pale gray band. "This is at once the altimeter and the speed indicator. The green circle in the middle represents the boat. The outline of the shadows depicts the profile of the land directly ahead. The lower you fly, the larger becomes the green circle. The green touches the black when the boat touches ground."

Barch nodded. "It seems easy enough."

SHE watched intently for a moment or two, then asked, "Where are you heading?"

"San Francisco Bay, four hundred miles north."

"Markel tells me," she said, "that the Earthers have not been cannibals for a number of years. Why did you inform me otherwise?"

"Ha, ha," said Barch. "You failed to identify my characterization."

Komeitk Lelianr pursed her lips. "I had no idea that the Earthers employed characterizations."

"Not formally."

"And this characterization—what do you call it?"

"The *Sarcastic Zulu.*"

"Odd."

"Very."

"What then is the rite to which you are taking me?"

"It's called 'an evening out with a pretty girl.' "

"Oh?"

"We're going to a place called Hambone Kelly's across the bay from San Francisco . . . Or would you prefer a more decorous approach to Earth nightlife?"

"I suppose I must rely upon your judgment as to what might interest me."

"I don't know much about your frame of mind . . . Tell me something, how old are you?"

"Fifty-two." At Barch's surprised glance, she explained. "That would be twenty of your years."

"Your name is hard to pronounce," said Barch. "I'll call you 'Ellen.' "

In the dark he could not see the expression of her face. "Whatever is convenient for you." She reached, drew out a shelf, on which a chart was outlined in faintly glowing lines.

In the soft light Barch noticed that while she had dulled her skin to soft tan, her lips, untouched, glittered like gold-leaf.

"There's something that must be done," said Barch. "I hate to do it."

"What's that?"

"Lipstick. Hideous stuff that Earth girls smear on their mouths. But it's got to be done."

A lonesome cluster of lights appeared below, a luminous flower on a dark pasture. Barch gingerly lowered the boat, the lights spread apart. On the altimeter band the green circle grew wider, while the black shadow representing the terrain stretched lengthwise. The green and black met; the boat landed in a field opposite the town. Komeitk Lelianr watched him patiently.

"Would you like to get out?" Barch asked politely.

She hesitated. "Why?"

"No reason at all," said Barch. "Sit still."

She pushed through the hull, stood beside him in the darkness. A warm wind brought the smell of dust and dry hay. From a tent not far distant came a scuffling roar and a blare of music. "Roller-skating rink," said Barch briefly. "We go this way."

"Where?"

"Over to that little drugstore. I'll buy you some lipstick."

He reached out, took her hand. Her fingers went tense, then relaxed limply. In the red, green, yellow lights from the roller rink, Barch noticed a fastidious set to her mouth.

They crossed the highway. "You'd better wait out here," said Barch. "I'll only be a minute."

She stood in the shadows, a white and black harlequin shape, hair glinting in the colored lights. Barch, looking over his shoulder, thought nothing had ever hit him like this, coming and going; repulsion, attraction.

WHEN he returned, she was nowhere in sight. "Ellen! Ellen!" A pair of young bucks in faded jeans and sport shirts looked at him curiously.

He saw her by the roller rink, watching the swirling shapes inside. He walked to where she stood. "You gave me a scare."

She looked up with brief curiosity.

Barch said crossly, "I'm more or less responsible for you."

She looked back into the rink. "You need not feel so." Barch wondered in what characterization she spoke.

She nodded toward the dusty floor. "On the planet Eifal, they skate somewhat similarly on ice, and also on Pterni, although there they use electric skates and move like lightning."

"We skate on ice here too." His voice hung lamely in the air. She made no response.

After a moment he asked, "How many planets have you visited?"

"Oh—ten or twelve."

Barch felt illogically angry. "I suppose you check on native customs wherever you go?"

"I became interested in anthropology when we visited the anthropological museum on Baliberos. The Savants have tended it since the beginning of Baliberos' history."

"Not as primitive as the Earthers, then?"

She considered. "No, I would say not. A very much older race, of course, with a remarkable architectural technique."

Barch watched the skaters with unseeing eyes. This wouldn't work out. In his mind a scathing voice asked, what wouldn't work out? Barch evaded the question. It was easier to be angry. The college girl and the Zulu guide . . . Damn it, he told himself fiercely, I'll make it work out! I'm human and she's human. I don't care if she's visited a thousand planets. . . .

He turned determinedly back to her, took her hand, led her to where a patch of garish light poured from a window. "Stand still, and I'll put on your lipstick for you."

"Let me see it." She examined the metal case, the red paste. "What is it?"

"Aniline dye, wax, perfume. Perfectly harmless . . . Hold up your face." She looked up into his eyes a foot away.

The pulse in his throat nearly choked him.

He lifted up the lipstick.

He paused, swallowing hard. She looked up at him.

He clenched an arm around her; her waist was supple as silk; he kissed the surprised golden mouth, tenderly.

She drew back, wiped at her face. "Why did you do that?"

Barch said huskily, "Do you want the real news?"

"Of course."

"That's a sign of passion. Some call it love."

"Oh . . . I suppose it's to be expected. But don't do it again; it's not sanitary."

Barch's head was still whirling. Anger or fright would have stimulated him; he would have kissed her again. "Sanitation be damned . . . Here . . ." He put his hand behind her head, daubed lipstick on her mouth. "That's good enough."

In silence they returned across the field to the boat. Barch grasped the ball; the boat rose into the night.

Barch said presently, "Do you know what I mean by the word 'love?' "

"I suppose so. It has a different aspect in each of our characterizations; I imagine Earth love is included somewhere among them."

"Tell me," Barch said earnestly, "could you ever love me?"

She studied him with startled amusement, and seemed to inch slightly away. "Are Earthers usually so abrupt?"

Barch said through clenched teeth, "I talk too much. I make a fool of myself. Forget it."

"We Lekthwans are a peculiar race," said Komeitk Lelianr kindly. "Try to think of us as impersonal beings."

"Same way with the Earthers," muttered Barch. "Think of us as impersonal beings."

V

HILLS brought angular shapes to the altimeter band. A long carpet of light spread out below: San Leandro, Oakland, Berkeley. Barch flew a thousand feet over the shore of the bay, slanted down over San Pablo Avenue. "I think there's a vacant lot where we can leave the boat. Yes, there."

He set the car down behind a row of

eucalyptus trees. "Now we start."

From Hambone Kelly's, music came loud and strong to the street. "Another roller rink?" asked Komeitk Lelianr.

Barch was feeling dull and dead. "No. People come here to dance and drink and listen to music."

"Interesting! Interpretive dancing, I suppose, with sexual symbolism?"

"Well, I don't know about that. It's energetic dancing, at least."

"And what do you mean, 'drink?' "

"People take stimulating drinks to heighten their awareness, so that they enjoy themselves more intensely."

"Oh . . . And the music?"

Barch was warming to the subject. "I brought you purposely to hear the music—a special kind of music that may be new to you."

She listened. "Eight-part polyphony, is it not?"

Barch started at her. "There's only seven pieces in the band."

"There's one—a tinkling kind of harp that's playing in two parts."

"Oh, the piano." Barch was feeling worse now. "Let's go in."

He led her to a dim table. On a raised stage stood seven men playing trumpet, trombone, clarinet, piano, drums, banjo, and brass bass. They played with brilliant emphasis; music poured forth clear and impelling.

Barch said close to Komeitk Lelianr's ear, "This is the Yerba Buena Jazz Band. They're playing a tune called *Weary Blues*."

"It sounds not at all weary."

"No, quite the reverse." Barch turned to watch the band.

Music came in a tide, the trumpet ringing like a bar of pure energy; the trombone dark, rough, hoarse; the clarinet a fiery bird. There came the final chatter and smash of traps, then the sigh of release from the audience, deep from the stomach, the chest, the throat.

Barch turned to Komeitk Lelianr. "What do you think of it?"

"It seems loud and emotional."

"It's the music of our times," said Barch fervently. "It reflects our racial drive; it's the best of our contemporary creativeness."

Komeitk Lelianr leaned forward. "You appear to think in symbolic images," she remarked. "Am I right?"

"I don't know," replied Barch impatiently. "It's not important; won't you forget primitive anthropology for awhile?"

Barch saw her eyebrows flicker. "You do it automatically," he said bitterly.

"What?"

"Jump into characterizations. Find whatever role works out best at the moment, then get into it."

She frowned. "I've never thought of it in quite that way."

He made an impatient gesture. "Forget it . . . Tell me, what kind of music do the Lekthwans listen to?"

"Our music is much different from this. It's hard to explain. There is first the *Liddrsk* mode—an underlying base or legato, with notes falling on it like rain; then there is the *Cmodor*, in which a group of notes start in the distance, approach, certain notes advancing, then falling back, and all meeting at a core. Then there is the *Lyzg* mode—but it's even more complicated."

She turned her head to watch the dancing. "On Jeol last year we witnessed the Fuolghan—a religious ceremony with dancing much like this. It took place along the Sky-level, of course. And the music was different—the sound of metal wheels, and gongs of frozen hydrogen."

"Yes, yes." said Barch impatiently. "Music. That's why I brought you here. Listen."

Komeitk Lelianr listened. "Very interesting. But it jars me. It's too forthright, too uncompromising."

"No, no," cried Barch, with no very clear idea of what proposition he was contradicting. He spoke on with great intensity, willing that he arouse in her a feeling for the music and by extension, himself. "By your time-scale, we're a young people. Your own world is quiet,

your people are settled, complacent. Earth is different! This is an exciting time for Earth—the more so since the coming of the Lekthwans. Every day is new, fresh; every day sees something started, progress made toward a goal. . . . . We live with this drive, this thrust to the future—a dynamism that speaks in music."

He waited but Komeitk Lelianhr said nothing. Her thoughts were unreadable.

BARCH qualified. "I should say, the spirit of our section of the world. On other continents people live differently, and their music is different. The Chinese consider all our music marching music—jazz, chamber music, hymns, dirges, all of it."

A waitress approached. "Order, please?"

"Tom Collins, a pair," said Barch. He said to Komeitk Lelianr, "But we are the dominant force, the leaders—" he compressed his mouth "—until the Lekthwans came."

She laughed. "You forgot that for a few moments."

"Yes. So I did."

"Why do you tell me all this?"

Barch hesitated, then took the plunge. "Because I don't consider myself a barbarian. I'm your equal, whether you like it or not. And—"

The waitress placed a pair of tall glasses in front of them. "Dollar twenty, please."

Barch dropped money on the tray.

"And?"

Barch hesitated, seeking the meaningful words. "There are a lot of prizes in this universe. A person has to fight for them. You're one of these prizes."

"Me?" Komeitk Lelianr laughed.

"Yes, you," said Barch doggedly. "I've got to make you know I realize it, and that I'm in the competition."

Komeitk Lelianr touched the glass, smelled of it gingerly. "What is this?"

"Fruit-juice, carbonated water, ethyl alcohol, sugar."

"Living matter?"

"What if it is?" snapped Barch. "Basically, it's carbon, oxygen, hydrogen; what difference does it make where it came from? The fruit is dead now."

She screwed up her face, sipped. "It's not unpleasant. . . . Are these glasses sterile?"

"Probably not. That's why they put the alcohol in—to sterilize the glasses."

"Oh." After a moment she said, "What you say is interesting. Naturally I'm surprised at your ambitions."

"Naturally?" He accented the word.

"Why not? You saw me for the first time yesterday."

On her face Barch thought to detect a half-smile; the quick thought came that, no matter what color, what race, what stage of culture, feminine psychology remained the same. He saw her hand on the table, slim fingers absently touched the frosted glass. Barch's heart thudded under his shirt. He reached out, took her hand in his.

She frowned silghtly, withdrew her hand. And under the table Barch saw the motion where she rubbed it against her black and white garment.

They sat in silence. The band returned to the stand. Komeitk Lelianr watched them a moment. She said quietly, "You feel no tenderness toward me, no sympathy; we have no hopes in common; we have not dealt together with hardship or disappointment. You may feel passion, but you feel no love."

Barch leaned forward, but his tongue found no words.

"You are not interested in me as a person." She continued stonily. "I'm no more than a symbol to you. I'm the 'richest prize' that your vanity tells you that you deserve."

Barch felt sudden shame. He felt his cheeks burn. He turned away, watched the band.

Music. Barch gripped the glass until his knuckles showed white. He felt Komeitk Lelianr's dispassionate observation, then an equally dispassionate study of the dancers. Barch, he told himself, you're the biggest damn fool

the world has yet seen. From the corner of his eye he studied the girl's profile—clean-cut, delicate, proud. Barch, he said, the girl's too good for you. Not because she's a Lekthwan, but because you're a thick-headed boor. . . .

He set his shoulders, somewhere found his voice. It sounded rough and strained to his ears. "I'm sorry I brought you out under false pretenses."

She said wistfully, "Then there really are none of the ceremonies you described?"

"Perhaps in the middle of Africa."

"One of the remoter districts?"

"Yes, quite remote," said Barch sardonically. "A different race of people entirely, as different from us as—" He was about to add, "as we are from you," then stopped short. He drank from the tall green glass.

He pointed to a negro sitting at a table nearby. "That man is of African stock."

"Oh? He seems no different from you except in skin coloring. Does he practice the ceremonies you speak of?"

"No, of course not. He's been born into our society. He does, however, sometimes run into unpleasant discrimination." And he added maliciously, "Much, I suspect, as Earthers on Lekthwa experience."

Komeitk Lelianr pursed her lips, turned the tall glass between her fingers. The film was wearing off, her golden skin glinted underneath. Barch noticed that she had barely tasted the drink. "Don't you like it?"

She looked down indifferently, sipped at the straws. "Should I now feel exhilarated?"

"Not unless you drink two or three more."

She shook her head. "That's not likely." She rose to her feet. "Now we will go."

Sullenly Barch followed her out to the street, and back to the air-boat. Fighting to keep control of his voice he said, "If you are interested in sordid spectacles, I could take you to a prize fight or a wrestling match—although I'd prefer not."

She looked at him reflectively. "It would embarrass you?"

"Yes. It would embarrass me."

She shrugged. "Completely unnecessary; I am interested in Earth customs only from a scientific viewpoint. Perhaps you misunderstood my motives in arranging this trip."

Barch twisted his face in a wide humorless grin. "I don't think so. But it happens that I'm not interested in primitive rites myself, and my gallantry—or subservience—doesn't extend quite that far."

"Then we will return to the dome." She stepped through the hull, into the air-boat.

VI

THE boat rose into the night, automatically turned back toward Markel's dome, far to the south. San Pablo Avenue became a bright artery, flowing with twinkling head-light corpuscles. Overhead, the sky was luminous, dusted with glow from a million lights.

The boat flew south across the great central valley. The cities became blurs of light astern; the sky was dark and bright with stars. Komeitk Lelianr leaned back into the cushions, looking up at the sky.

Barch sat stiffly, watching the towns and villages appearing ahead, fading to the rear. He had nothing to say; he had gone out to joust at windmills, he had been unhorsed, humiliated. In the aftermath, he could understand something of the situation's inevitability. But it would have been worse, he thought with gloomy satisfaction, if he had not asserted his right to try.

Komeitk Lelianr said softly, "I can see my native sun, up by that bright star. . . ."

"That's Spica."

"Up and to the left is a fainter star—Skyl, our sun."

Barch contemplated the star without

interest. "You sound as if you're homesick."

She nodded. "It's very lonely on a strange planet with none of my friends; therefore I seek to bury myself in study."

Barch lapsed into silence. Dark shadows on the altimeter showed rounded swellings, then ahead angular ridges.

Suddenly, low ahead, an intense green flash appeared in the sky. Komietk Lelianr jerked up in her seat. She bent her head over a mesh, spoke staccato Lekthwan words.

There was no reply. A faint sound came from her throat.

Barch sat up. "What's the matter?"

"I don't know. . . ." She drove home the speed button.

Shadows fled across the altimeter band. Komeitk Lelianr sat tense, clutching her knees; Barch looked uneasily ahead. Snowy peaks gleamed below; a few moments later Markel's dome appeared, faintly luminescent, peaceful.

The air-boat slowed, dropped, settled into its bay.

Komeitk Lelianr stepped quickly out. Barch followed. On the terrace she froze into a statue. Barch asked anxiously, "What's the trouble?"

"I don't know. I feel something—bad."

Barch started around the dark terrace. Fibers of green light glowed in the blue glass under his feet.

Ahead lay something dark. Barch ran forward, the muscles of his throat tight and stiff. He knelt slowly. Claude Darran. Barch stared in astonishment. Cold, dead—unthinkable!

A shape stood behind him: Komeitk Lelianr. Barch rose numbly to his feet. He walked forward; two paces, four—another dark shape. It was small, sprawled carelessly. Behind him he heard horrified gasping sounds. Barch's neck was cold as ice. He bent beside the pitiful object that had been Sia Spedz, then rising quickly, drew Komeitk Lelianr to the balustrade.

She said in an agonized whisper, "The Klau—they have come to Earth. . . . They have been here. . . ."

BARCH peered into the darkness, feeling ineffectual, indecisive. He had no real desire to investigate, to confront a set of off-world murderers. From inside the dome came a sudden thud. Komeitk Lelianr whimpered, jerked forward.

Spasmodic strength came to Barch's legs; he shoved ahead of her, moved toward the dim-glowing portal. Cautiously he looked within: nothing but an article or two of furniture. Komeitk Lelianr pressed against his back breathing in soft sobs. He ducked inside; Komeitk Lelianr ran ahead, thrust aside a portiere of green smoke. She froze, arms and legs at grotesque angles.

Barch looked over her shoulder, down at two golden bodies. There was a great deal of blood, puddled and netted along the floor. Barch drew the dazed girl back.

She said, "I must communicate. . . ." She walked awkwardly across the room, waved open a portal. Two more corpses—Markel's guests. And at the communication table sat a great black creature. Stiff black bristles framed his face; his eyes gleamed like polished jet, with red four-pronged centers.

The Klau stared at Barch; Barch's legs were numb, wooden. Grumbling, mumbling, the Klau arose, clutching a heavy black dagger.

Barch backed sweating against the wall; the Klau hacked. Barch caught the black wrist, planted a foot in the belly, kicked. The Klau lurched, toppled, fell with a dull roar of rage.

Barch grinning like a wolf, planted his foot in the pulpy neck. Thick hands seized his ankle; Barch swayed.

He heard a hiss, a grunt. The hands clenched, the four-pronged red stars widened, slowly folded in on themselves.

Komeitk Lelianr arose from the dagger in the black chest.

"Come, we must go," she panted. "There are others!" Barch pointed

questioningly to the communication table. "No—he has destroyed it."

She ran to the portal. Barch paused to wrench at the dagger. He heard a thin scream, looked up, saw a flurrying black shape. Something heavy, furry, enveloped him. His legs were swept out from under him, he was carried off like a swaddled child.

Hands gripped him hard, heaved. He was free, falling, falling—a hundred feet, a thousand feet, mile after mile. . . .

KICKING frantically, Barch freed himself from the fur robe. . . . Still falling. . . . Strange there was no rush of wind, no pound or flutter at his arms and legs. He stiffened to rigidity. The air was calm. He was suspended, he floated in darkness, lack of gravity gave the illusion of free fall. Now his eyes adapted themselves, he could see walls glowing with a dull maroon light, as if red-hot. But the air was cold, there was no heat on his face.

Komeitk Lelianr floated quietly over his head. He caught an ankle, drew her down. Her eyes were closed.

Barch relaxed like a spent swimmer. Events were moving too fast. He wondered, am I awake or asleep? This is too fantastic for reality. He tried to rouse himself, without success. I am already awake, he decided.

Inspecting the surroundings, he saw that they floated in an ovular cell with no apparent entrance. He felt, as much as heard, a high-pitched whine, so shrill as to be nearly inaudible.

He looked back to Komeitk Lelianr, touched her forehead. It felt hot and dry. . . . A surge of pity made his eyes heavy; mother, father, sister—hacked, bloody, dead. A terrible sight. And why had they been spared? Why did they float in a cell?

Barch closed his eyes. He wanted to sleep, forget, ignore. . . . He felt a stirring beside him. Komeitk Lelianr

[*Turn page*]

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"... IMAGINE ME dancing with a scarecrow! How can he be so careless about his hair? It's straggly, unkempt, and . . . Oh-oh—loose dandruff! He's got Dry Scalp, all right. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic."

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opened her eyes. She was completely matter-of-fact. She felt her head, licked her lips, looked around. Her eyes rested dispassionately on Barch.

Barch steadied his voice. "Well?"

"We're in a Klau ship."

"Where are they taking us? Why haven't they killed us?"

Komeitk Lelianr shrugged. "Corpses are valueless. We probably will end up at Magarak. . . ."

"Magarak?"

"A manufacturing center."

"But—"

"We're slaves."

"Oh." Before Barch's eyes flashed the scenes of Earth like color slides. All this he was leaving. All this he would see no more. In a strained voice he said, "And what is this Magarak like?"

"Gray. Dank. Cold."

Barch felt a spasm of rage—toward Komeitk Lelianr, toward the Lekthwans. Why should he suffer in their quarrel? "Why don't the Lekthwans do something about these Klau?"

Komeitk Lelianr smiled half-contemptuously. "There are three Lekthwan planets, forty-two Klau worlds. There is war between us that perhaps you can not completely understand—a long-range combat of our—" she sought for a word to express a complex Lekthwan idea "—moral vitality. In the end we will win. Meanwhile many people suffer." She shrugged. "The universe is not a paradise."

"No," said Barch. Earth suddenly seemed very small and negligible, a bucolic backwater off to one side of the space-empires. "So then—we spend the rest of our lives on Magarak?"

She made no answer. Barch glanced desperately around the glowing walls. "Can't we be ransomed, can't we escape?"

She spoke slowly, as if to a child. "Ransom is inapplicable; there is no medium of exchange between Lekthwa and the Klau. The Klau have energy, raw material, technical skill. Labor is the scarcest commodity of the universe; labor is the Klau wealth."

"And escape?"

She shrugged. "Recently a dozen Lenape hid in a false cargo blister, and reached the Maha Triad. If they find a way home to Lenau, the Klau will suffer. If they are recaptured—the Klau will use them to discourage others."

"The main difficulty seems to be in leaving the planet."

"Exactly." She reached in a pouch at her belt, brought out an atomizer. Carefully she sprayed her face, her arms.

Barch watched her. "Why do you do that?"

"I think the Klau consider me an Earther. I would prefer it so. . . . Give me the lip-dye, please."

VII

TIME passed, perhaps two days. Three times the walls swelled into blisters, bursting with a pop to eject packets of gray mush into the cell.

Komeitk Lelianr had completely withdrawn into herself. She spoke no words to Barch, ignored the food. Finally Barch pushed himself across to her. "If you don't eat, you'll be weak. . . . You'll get sick."

She looked at him languidly. "What then?"

Barch truculently knit his brows. "What's the trouble? Given up?"

"What is there to give up?"

"Confidence."

She said in a soft voice, "We're slaves; slaves have no need for confidence."

"I'm not a slave until I feel like a slave."

Something seemed to give way inside of her. Her voice became harsh. "You have no concept of Magarak's reality; you refuse to think; you live by ready-made emotional doctrines—a substitute for thought. What is worse, you try to wrench reality to fit your ideas."

"I've heard all that before," said Barch evenly. "Sometimes the emotional doctrines work out. Do you know why?"

"Why?"

"Because neither you nor I are really pals with reality. We don't know whose emotional doctrine it fits. . . . Anyway—whether it's impossible or not—if there's a way out of this Magarak slave-camp, I'll try to find it—and I'll take you with me if I can." He took hold of her shoulders, squeezed as if to shake her into confidence. With dull annoyance, he noted the quivering of her flesh. He took his hands away.

She said wearily, "Your ideas are—not well-formed. You can't escape Magarak merely because you have the will to escape."

Barch laughed grimly. "I certainly can't escape without it. . . . Those twelve Lenape got loose."

"There's a great difference; they are a highly developed race; they have a feeling for the organization of Magarak. Also, they were in a position to control the growth of the ship on which they escaped."

"Growth?"

"Yes, certainly. Ships are grown, like you Earthers grow cabbages. The Lenapes are experts in the techniques of growth-matter; on Lenau they grow their dwellings, their ocean-ships, their air-ships. On Lekthwa much the same is true."

Barch grinned. "That's a point of difference between us. We grow our food and build our space-ships. You grow your ships and build your food."

Komeitk Lelianr said listlessly, "It's easier to grow ships than to build them. When you become proficient in space-ship design you will recognize the advantages."

"Well, cabbages, space-ships, Lenape aside, there are other ways of escape."

"How?" She laughed shortly. "You know nothing of Magarak. You cannot imagine it. It's not a matter of killing a guard, jumping a fence and running."

"I didn't say I'd succeed. I said I'd try."

She smiled. "Yes. The *dynamic thrust* of your race."

Barch looked at her with near-dislike. "Call it anything you want. Maybe when a race gets old like yours, it gets stale, sour."

"Perhaps." She stretched out her legs, her arms. After a moment she turned her head, looked at him with what seemed new curiosity. "Your optimism is stimulating, in any event."

Barch grinned. Ages ago, Claude Darran had spoken of Barch's capacity for optimism in different terms.

As if following his thoughts, Komeitk Lelianr murmured, "What strange life-lines we weave through the cosmic gel. . . . Three days ago. . . ."

For the first time, Barch saw tears in her eyes.

Time passed.

WITHOUT warning, the cell burst open. White light dazzled their eyes; there was a wave of sound, a tumble of black shapes. The white light cut off, the walls were whole. The cell suddenly seemed full of ill-smelling flesh.

Barch pressed back against the wall. There were eight new-comers, six men, two women: squat white creatures with moist bulldog faces. They wore threadbare gray smocks, leather stockings, shoes like blobs of yellow gum.

Komeitk Lelianr said tonelessly, "Kopsari, or perhaps Modoks. I thought it strange the hold was given to us alone."

Warily Barch watched the eight. Their faces showed no emotion, no expression. There was hoarse conversation, then dead silence while all of them inspected Barch and Komeitk Lelianr.

Komeitk Lelianr said with a tinge of interest in her voice, "I would fit them approximately at 14-90, by the Epignotic Cultural Calculation. . . . Notice, the cloth of their garments; durable, shaped rather than woven; their shoes, molded permanently to their feet. These must be outdoor serfs, in the service of what the science calls a *Technics-Lord.*"

Barch made a non-committal sound.

"Not an uncommon pattern around

the universe," she went on in a monotone. "Their lot will change little for better or worse."

Barch muttered, "I wonder how much longer we'll be in this hold."

"Are you anxious for Magarak?"

"No, I don't like the smell."

"You might sometime wish yourself back in this cell."

"Do you think they'll separate us?"

"Certainly."

Barch felt a sharp twinge of panic.

She said in a flat voice, "First the slaves are graded at rough intellectual levels; they must pass through a hall filled with traps, pitfalls, obstacles, unpleasant sensations, and the like, which they avoid according to their intelligence. After this first division, the lower grades are classified by physique, agility, dexterity." She looked across the cell. "However, these serfs will probably go out to the mud-flats along Xolboar Sea, a great reclamation project, which uses up thousands of labor-units a year."

"And how about us?"

"A thousand possibilities."

BARCH awoke to a sound of harsh voices. He crouched instinctively, slowly relaxed. Two of the blank-faced serfs were fighting, clawing clumsily at each others faces. The remaining men and the women watched critically.

"Disgusting animals," said Komeitk Lelianr.

One of the contestants suddenly ceased to fight. The other put his legs against the square back, jerked back at the head. The eyes stared up, the neck snapped. There came a sudden raucous babble.

"What are they fighting about?" Barch asked in bewilderment.

"Impossible to say."

"Look. . . ."

The two women were slapping at the man who had conquered, stolidly, without anger. At last he threw up his hands as if in defeat, crossed to a man who had been watching, caught him by the neck, smashed his head against the wall until the skull became like jelly. The women spoke on angrily for a few moments, then appeared to lose interest. No one heeded the limp bodies. There were a few dark glances cast toward Barch and Komeitk Lelianr, one or two monosyllables, then silence.

Barch said speculatively, "I wonder what would happen. . . ." He looked thoughtfully at Komeitk Lelianr. "Off hand, would you say that these creatures will be well-treated on Magarak?"

She examined him curiously. "I have no idea. We know very little of Magarak. I assume that they are not as strictly supervised as the technical workers."

"Suppose the Klau found a body in your clothes and a body in mine. . . ."

Kotmeitk Lelianr shuddered. "You want me—to wear those clothes?"

"We have nothing to lose, perhaps something to gain."

"But," she shook her head. "I see no reason—"

"If we get sent out to those mud-flats, we go out together!"

"Oh," said Komeitk Lelianr in sudden enlightenment. "The dynamic attitude, this tinkering with destiny. . . ."

"Yes," said Barch grimly. "If I couldn't be doing something, I might as well throw up the sponge. . . . Are you game?"

She shrugged. "It makes no difference."

Barch flushed. "If you'd rather go it alone—say so."

"No, Roy. I don't object to you personally."

"Thanks," growled Barch.

She smiled. "Maybe our friends won't like us undressing their dead."

"Let 'em try to stop me. . . . There'll be eight corpses instead of two."

VIII

HE PUSHED himself out to the nearest body, and with a challenging survey of the six white faces, began to

jerk the gray garment loose.

There was an undertone of muttering. Black eyes became beady and thoughtful. No one stirred. Underneath the jacket was a skin-tight coverall of matted fiber. "This is the smallest," said Barch. "Let's have your clothes."

Komeitk Lelianr slipped out of the white and black harlequin costume, climbed gingerly into the gray smock.

Barch stripped the second corpse down to the gray matted undersuit, pulled off his coat and trousers. Closing his nostrils to the sour odor of the garment, he pulled it over his head.

There was motion along the wall. Barch looked up sharply. One of the men was feeling the material of his coat. My good gray flannel, thought Barch. He jerked it away, started to pull it on the corpse.

Now there were mutters. The older of the women made a furious babbling sound; the other made a gesture with stiff fingers against her lips. Barch ignored the noise, buttoned the coat, began to pull the legs into the trousers. The legs were too short, the cuffs dragged ridiculously over the yellow blobs of wax or resin that covered the dead man's feet.

From the corner of his eye he saw Komietk Lelianr deftly thrusting the second body into her black and white costume. She buckled her pouch under the gray smock, then bringing forth her atomizer, sprayed the dead face, the coarse hair to a dull beige tone.

Barch critically inspected her gleaming silver hair. "You don't make a very good peasant."

He looked around the cell. One of the Modoks wore a loose conical cap. Barch pushed himself forward, reached out, took the cap. The man half-heartedly clutched for the cap, then backed away, eyes staring with frantic alarm.

The women babbled in approval.

Barch yanked the cap down on Komeitk Lleniar's hair. "There," he inspected her, "that's a little better." He turned to look at their cellmates. "They're certainly an odd-acting bunch. . . ."

"It's all relative," said Komeitk Lelianr. "They undoubtedly think the same of us."

Barch looked down at his shoes, at Komeitk Lelianr's sandals. "Do you think we'll pass?"

"I couldn't say."

The ship shivered; they heard deep clanking sounds, like an anchor-chain running down a hawse-pipe. "What's that?"

"I don't know. . . . Perhaps we have arrived."

"If so—we didn't get changed any too soon."

The ship jarred; the red glow in the wall pulsed bright and dim. A moment later the cell burst open. Gravity seized at the ten bodies—eight living, two dead. They slid down the cell wall, together with all the accumulated litter, trash and refuse, down a smooth chute. Fresh air was cold on their faces; sound roared at their ears.

Barch's eyes smarted under the sudden light, his legs felt limp at the knees. "Ellen!" he cried. "Ellen, where are you?"

BLINKING, he looked around him. They stood in a fenced enclosure, like a cattle pen. Komeitk Lelianr was a few feet distant, holding to her cap, which the original owner was attempting to reclaim. Barch staggered over, smote the man with his fist.

Something stung at his back, burning like fire; he turned snarling. Above him, on a ramp, stood a tremendous man with blood-red skin. Black spikes of hair extended like quills six inches to all sides of his head. He had eyes with red four-starred centers like the Klau and he carried a tube with a flickering serpent of light darting up, down, in, out.

He roared at Barch in a voice like a brass horn, flourished the flail. A disturbance in the adjoining pen attracted his attention. He pounded down the

ramp. The flickering light-snake curled out. Barch heard a sharp cry.

He gained Komeitk Lelianr's side, dazed and angry, shook his head as if to clear it of confusion, glowered up at the trumpeting red whip-wielders.

Directly overhead a hatch opened; a stream of bodies plummeted at him. He jumped aside, pushed Komeitk Lelianr against the fence, away from the milling center of the pen, and here he caught his breath.

The ship continued to discharge. Men and women tumbled, slid, spewed from orifices under the ship, their fall broken by the bawling bodies below.

Past the great hulk Barch glimpsed the shapes of two other ships. Beyond rose the facade of a building a mile high, the roof-line blurred in fog. There was a steady road in the air, like the sound of surf; a smell of mud, rust, ammonia hung across the pens.

Komeitk Lelianr said coolly in his ear, "We're part of a not-too-valuable cargo. We'll be worked very hard, we'll die very quickly."

He looked at her truculently. "You sound as if you don't care."

"I know what to expect. This is Magarak."

Barch said, "Personally, I'm scared stiff."

She shugged. "Adjust yourself, your fear will pass."

Barch glared. "Adjust myself be damned! I'm mostly afraid that I won't be able to make these devils regret the day they saw me."

She glanced up to the top of the ramp. "The Podruods will soon cure you of that."

"They have eyes like the Klau."

"They're a sub-species of Klau. There are Big Klau, Little Klau, Bornghaleze, Podruods—all Klau stock. The Podruods are the troops, the guards, the fighters."

A metallic clatter rang out accompanied by distant shouts. Barch, turning his head, saw a long feather-shaped boom vibrating back and forth across the sky. Overhead six white balls snapped past—one after the other, like rockets.

He said in Komeitk Lelianr's ears, "This is bedlam."

She nodded briefly. "Compared to other parts of Magarak it's quiet."

The Podruod voice rang out above like a clarion. "Hey! Hey! Hey!" Directly behind the fence opened.

"I guess we move," muttered Barch.

A sudden rush of gray bodies with frightened white faces surged past. Knobby shoulders pummelled Barch. "Ellen!" he cried. "Ellen!" He looked all around desperately. "Ellen! Where are you? Ellen! Ellen!"

Arms thrust angrily at him, he was carried along the tide. "Ellen!" He thought he heard his name; he stopped to listen. Nothing but the shuffle and thud of feet, ringing shouts of the great red Podruods.

A chute loomed ahead. Four abreast the Modoks scuttled up, jumped down into what appeared to be a long black barge. A Podruod with legs painted blue stood in the stern, his face working like rubber, yelling, crying.

Barch craned his neck, searching the sea of alien faces. Fifty feet ahead he saw Komeitk Lelianr. "Ellen!" She turned her head. A great red hand obscured her face; she stumbled up the chute.

A second chute opened at Barch's right; the Podruods roared new directions.

Barch pushed forward, now shoving against the tide. He saw Komeitk Lelianr half-way up the chute. The Podruod roared, struck at him; the light-serpent snapped out.

Barch fell to his knees; feet pressed around him, stepping on his hands, his legs.

He crawled doggedly through, saw massive Podruod legs ahead. In sudden fury, he dove forward, tackled the legs. The great body toppled; the light-whip rolled in the dust. Barch snatched at it, missed. He rose to his feet, raced up the chute, pressed into the last of the group.

From behind came a hoarse yelling;

Barch glancing over his shoulder, saw a clot of Modoks kicking at the great spiked head, smiling, laughing.

Podruods came pounding along the ramp; light-snakes darted; the gray men dutifully marched into the chutes. The red man writhed, kicked on the ground like a beetle on its back.

Barch pushed ahead. "Ellen!" He grasped her arm. "I thought I had lost you."

She took his hand, squeezed it tight. Barch's heart gave a sudden throb of joy. It was almost worth coming to Magarak.

A gate clanged behind them. The barge shuddered, rose into the air, slid clear of the slave-yard.

Barch and Komeitk Lelianr, the last aboard, leaned against the rail.

Komeitk Lelianr motioned across the panorama. "Now—look at Magarak. . . ."

IX

THE scene was too vast, too complex for mental grasp. Barch sensed flaring lights, gigantic objects in motion, monstrous shapes. Near at hand the lights were like openings into furnaces: yellow, orange, green-white, red; at the horizon they gleamed and flickered like stars.

Heavy sound came at a constant grumbling pitch, so far-reaching that it seemed an intrinsic property of the planet. Across the sky moved endless shapes—booms swinging in slow circles, black objects like spiders darting along glistening tracks, barges floating at various levels, blasts of dark vapor. Then underneath were the buildings: gray-white, greenish-gray, black, orange-black, some faintly etched with window lines, others blank as new paper. Between were dark crevasses flickering with yellow or bluish glow far at the bottom.

Barch looked up into the sky, smoky, sooty, lumpy with low clouds. "Is it day or night? . . . It must be day."

Komeitk Lelianr asked wryly, "What do you think of Magarak?"

"I feel like an ant in a thrashing-machine," said Barch. He looked around the horizon. "How far does the madhouse go on?"

"We must be on Kpoa," she mused. "A large continent—about five thousand of your miles wide."

"Five thousand miles of—this!"

She nodded. "Underneath are the barracks, the commissaries, the nurseries."

"Nurseries—for what?"

"Slave-children. Slaves are encouraged to breed. The women become pregnant often to avoid heavy work. The children make the best slaves; they know no other kind of life."

Barch silently watched the shapes and lights of Magarak drift past below.

"Do you still think you can—" she nodded "—defeat this?"

Barch looked at her resentfully. "Do you think I won't try?"

"No. I think you'll try. I think you'll end up on the grid." She added tonelessly, "That's where the slaves are punished."

Below them wound a dull brown river; in the distance Barch saw the leaden gleam of open water. "Is that Xolboar?"

"I'm not sure. In our schooling we learn the geography of many worlds, but I can't remember Magarak too well."

Barch stared over the side. Another barge drifted toward them, passed two hundred feet below. Barch saw six long dark shapes, like spindles, caught the white flash of upturned faces. The barges drifted apart.

The sea spread leaden, listless; they drifted over dreary mud-flats. Ahead appeared a long black line which, as the barge drew near, broke up into clots of men, piles of cut stone, spidery cranes. A coffer dam of mud had been scraped up against the sea; in deep oozing pits, workers, moving slow as cold ants, fitted great stones together.

"That's what you'll be doing," said Komeitk Lelianr in a flat voice.

Barch stared down into the dismal pits. "And what happens to the women?"

"Some other kind of work. Chipping stones, perhaps."

"If they separate us—we'll never see each other again."

"Does it matter? This is Magarak."

"It matters to me."

"Hard workers are allowed to visit the female barracks. Breeding is a reward for hard work. Perhaps you will chance upon me in the stalls." She looked around the raft, at the dough-faced creatures in the gray jerkins. "I would rather have you than one of them."

"Thanks," said Barch bitterly. "You overwhelm me."

They passed a barge loaded with stone. Barch asked, "What keeps these barges up? Do they use the same machinery as the space-ships?"

"I would imagine so." Her voice was disinterested. "The principle of plane-cohesion is fundamental."

"But they could leave the planet?"

"I suppose so." She watched the reclamation project fall astern. "We're not bound there, at least. . . ."

THE ocean shore curved away behind them; a range of mountains loomed dark ahead. The sky was darkening rapidly. The sun had settled beyond the overcast. "I wonder how much farther?" asked Barch.

Komeitk Lelianr knit her brows. "If those mountains are the Palamkum, then that was Tchul Sea, and this is Kredbon instead of Kdoa. I think Xolboar Sea is beyond those mountains."

"Then we get sorted out, and put to work?"

"I suppose so. "

Barch examined the mountains with interest. They were great masses of white rock, split by deep valleys and gorges. Black vegetation carpeted the valley slopes; snow gleamed on the high cols and slopes.

Barch said in a hushed voice, "Can your shoes hold up both of us?"

She looked at him first in startled wonder, then speculatively. "No."

"Suppose we jumped off the raft."

"If I could stay on my feet—we'd drop slowly."

"We'd never be caught down there."

She stared down into the dark wilderness. "We'd starve to death."

"Maybe, maybe not . . . At least we would be free. We'd be out of the mud-pits, out of the breeding-barracks."

She glanced at the Modoks, made up her mind. "Very well. Try to put your feet on top of mine."

Barch looked over the side. They flew over a long valley. "Now," muttered Barch. "Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Now!" He jumped up, straddled the rail. Komeitk Lelianr climbed nimbly after. Startled white faces turned. There was an excited chatter, a couple of arms tentatively outstretched.

Barch bared his teeth, kicked. The commotion attracted the eye of the Podruod controller. With great lunging strides he came forward.

"I'm ready," panted Komeitk Lelianr. "Step on my feet."

Barch jumped down, clasped her around the waist; they toppled off into gray air. He glimpsed the rectangular hull of the raft slipping past overhead with a hundred little nubbins of heads silhouetted against the twilight. Sky and mountains whirled in sickening topys-turvy motion.

Komeitk Lelianr was crying in his ear. "My feet, my feet!"

Barch clamped his legs around hers, set his feet on her instep. He felt a braking, the sky and mountains steadied.

Looking anxiously aloft he saw the raft drifting quietly on; the cargo was fuzzy gray, like a load of jute. He turned his eyes down. A massive crag, like a rotten tooth, stabbed up at them with frightening velocity; below was the vast slot of valley, the shining trickle of a river.

"We're dropping fast." He looked into her face. It was clenched in frowning concentration, as she balanced on the shifting angles of force under her feet.

"We're braking," she said. "The lower

we get, the slower we fall."

Barch relaxed, tried to follow her as she shifted weight. He became acutely conscious of the feel of her body in his his hands—warm, flexible, quick . . . Dark fronds of vegetation reached up at them. Thirty feet—twenty feet—ten feet. . . .

There was the crash, scatter, agitation of breaking stems and snapping branches. Barch saw the ground, the black humus of the hillside; at six feet he jumped, so as not to land with Komeitk Lelianr's feet under his. She cried out in surprise. Relieved of Barch's weight, she bounced back into the air. She caught at branches, swung back and forth like an acrobat, then slowly settled.

Barch caught her as she came down, kissed her. She submitted quietly, sighing.

Barch's head went light; a ferment of exultation rose up in him. Now he woud fight this world single-handed; he would move heaven and earth; his feats would be fables for the future; Komeitk Lelianr would be proud; they would—abruptly she pushed him away, stood looking off into the forest. Barch anxiously moved forward, then held himself, waited.

X

PRESENTLY she turned back. In the dimness of mingled shadow and twilight, Barch could not read her face.

In a controlled voice she said, "It is clear to me that former distinctions are now artificial."

They were in the first place, thought Barch so intensely that he felt she must hear.

"We're on a common level," she went on in a low voice. "We're alone, we've nothing to look forward to—"

"That's wrong," Barch protested. "There's everything ahead of us! I'd

[*Turn page*]

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rather be here with you than back in San Francisco without you."

She seemed to be smiling. "Anyway, here we are. Regardless of my personal prejudices, I'll have to adjust to the inevitable."

Barch stood back scowling. "What kind of characterization is that?"

She shrugged. "I hardly know. Without thinking I drop into whatever suits the moment."

Barch thought, she can't be blamed for her upbringing; something of what she said was true: the chances of long life were not too good. The feel of her against his chest was still warm, urgent. He reached for her again; she submitted conscientiously. Disturbing ideas darted around Barch's mind like bats; he closed his mind to them, and presently they vanished.

The sky was a black ceiling; dank wind blew roaring through the valley. Trees flapped and clattered; from the far distance came a harsh gurgling whistle. Komeitk Lelianr whispered, "What's that?"

Barch said, It's breakfast, if I can catch it."

"In the dark it might catch you."

They looked down the slope, found the river. "We'll be warmer up here," said Barch, "out of the valley. We'd better not build a fire until we learn more about the country."

In a little hollow under a rock he piled moss, dry humus, and contrived a covering of fronds wrenched down from the trees. "Like sleeping in a haystack," said Barch. "You get in first."

Rain fell during the night, but the wind blew it over the rock, and they stayed dry. Magarak morning came damp and gray.

"Ouch!" said Barch, "my aching bones." He felt his face. "Thank the lord, no whiskers. I've got your father to thank for that."

Komeitk Lelianr sat brushing the moss off her gray smock.

Barch went on cheerfully. "Next—breakfast. Are you hungry?"

She made no answer.

Barch rose to his feet, looked carefully up and down the hillside. The trees by daylight were like kelp: black and brown, with red veins along the leaves. Overhead the sky swam heavy with clouds.

Barch pulled down a branch, broke free a cluster of nuts. He broke one of these open, smelled, recoiled from the acrid odor. "No nourishment here . . . Let's see what's down by the river."

Halfway down he stopped short. "I smell smoke."

Komeitk Lelianr raised her head. "I don't smell anything."

"Does anyone live in these hills?"

"I don't know."

"If there were," said Barch, "maybe we could learn what and where to eat."

Komeitk Lelianr suddenly looked as if she were about to cry. Barch said, "Now, now, what's the trouble?"

"Living seems so futile."

"Futile? We're just getting started!"

"But how will we end up? We'll starve, we'll freeze. If anyone sees us, they'll hunt us like animals."

"We'll put up quite a fight first," said Barch. "In the meantime—" kissing her forehead, he pretended not to notice that she pulled back a trifle "—we'll never be any worse off."

Komeitk Lelianr laughed weakly. "No."

"Now, let's see what kind of country we're in."

Cautiously they approached the river. Standing in a pool was a blackish-green creature with the head of an owl, a bat's wings, the legs of a heron. It watched them approach, then fluttered up, flapped croaking off down the valley.

"That's a good sign," said Barch. "It means that there's something to be caught. That bird wasn't just taking a bath."

"We catch things—then eat them?"

"We're savages now," said Barch airily. "Both of us, remember?"

"I remember very well."

Barch crept toward the pool, over glistening dark rocks. Komeitk Lelianr

remained aloof, her face turned away.

Barch stared into the pool. Water swirled quietly over round stones of various colors. Things like trifoil spirals wriggled through the water. Too small, thought Barch. He scanned the bottom. One of the round stones moved. Barch grabbed shoulder-deep into water like ice, came up with a squirming bulb. Dangling tentacles flapped, wound around his wrist; his skin burned as if singed with flame. Barch cursed, threw the bulb up on the shore. It scuttled toward the river. Barch kicked it back, dropped a chunk of rock on it. When he picked up the rock, there was nothing below but a mat of whitish fibers and ooze.

Barch turned away in disgust. A red weal had formed along his wrist, the bones of his forearm ached. "Let's go on downstream," he said through his teeth. "Maybe we'll find something a little less hard to get along with."

THE river flowed smoothly a hundred yards, then began to drop. It pounded over step-like ledges, split itself against boulders. Scrambling over the wet rocks, Barch almost fell a dozen times. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Komeitk Lelianr walking serenely two or three feet over the river.

Said Barch quizzically, "I wish I had a pair of those sandals."

Komeitk Lelianr made no reply.

"How long will the power hold out?" asked Barch.

"With steady use, perhaps a month or two."

"And how high can you walk?"

"Two or three hundred feet. Higher, if I take care."

"Suppose you walk up fifty feet, and tell me what you see."

Swaying and stepping as if walking on stilts, she rose into the air. The wind caught her, carried her drifting down the valley.

Barch scrambled over the rocks to keep abreast. "What do you see?"

"Rocks, more black trees, a lake."

"No smoke? No buildings?"

"Nothing." She came back down in great sliding steps. "Do you think we'll find anything to eat?"

"Of course," Barch said confidently. "Down by the lake, perhaps."

A few minutes later the valley widened. Before them spread the lake, roughly circular, surrounded first by a rim of marsh, then a strip of open slope over-grown with thorny bush. Each bush terminated in a tight green sac, like a green-gage. Barch picked one, split it, smelled of the pulp. "Rather like lemon verbena, or bay rum."

Komeitk Lelianr said in practical tones. "It's likely to be poisonous."

Barch smelled again, doubtfully. "One can't hurt me too much. . . ."

"It might make you sick."

"Then we'll know it's poison; there's nothing like the empirical method." He bit into the sac, chewed thoughtfully. "It doesn't taste very good."

"Look," said Komeitk Lelianr, "there's that flying thing again."

Barch dropped the thorn berry, watched the owl-headed, bat-winged, heron-legged creature slide to an awkward landing along the shore of the lake.

"If we can catch him," said Barch, "we'll have roast owl." He bent, picked up a rock, moved cautiously forward.

The owl-bat-heron waded out into the lake—stopped short, one leg high in the air. The leg stabbed forward, jerked forward, jerked back up; a black shape twisted through the air, fell into the thorny thicket.

"That looks like a fish," exclaimed Barch. The owl-bat stalked toward his catch. Barch ran forward, waving his arms. "No you don't." Gingerly he picked the black fish out of the thorns, while the owl-bat scuttled back into the water. Komeitk Lelianr watched with distaste.

Barch tossed her his cigarette lighter. "You build a fire, I'll clean this thing."

He set it on a flat rock beside the river, sawed off head and tail with a sharp flake of stone. Gritting his teeth, he split

open the soft belly, pulled, scraped, washed, and eventually had two strips of leathery white flesh.

Komeitk had started a fire by the edge of the forest; Barch secured a pair of green twigs, carefully roasted the fish for them.

"There," he said, "that smells pretty good." He laid the fish on a rock, licked his fingers. "It even tastes good."

Komeitk Lelianr ate without comment.

"It's not too filling," said Barch, "but we won't starve today." He looked back to the green thorn-berries. "They didn't taste good—but I don't feel any pangs yet." He covered over the fire. "Now we'd better explore."

A distant explosion jarred the air. Echoes rumbled away down the valley. "What's that?"

"It's called blasting," Komeitk Lelianr explained indifferently. "An unstable substance is confined, then—"

Barch said sourly, "We poor savages are not entirely ignorant of explosives. In fact we make a pretty good one out of uranium."

Komeitk Lelianr stood listening. "Probably there's a stone quarry somewhere over a mountain."

Barch anxiously scanned the mountain-side. "We've got to explore, find out where the nearest settlement is, if there is one."

"And then what?"

"We'll know more when we see how the land lies. If we could steal one of those barges somehow we might . . ." His voice trailed off into silence. He caught Komeitk Lelianr, pulled her down behind a thorn-bush. "Quiet!"

Across the lake three men stood like pillars of gray rock.

"They've seen us," whispered Komeitk Lelianr.

"I don't think so. I saw them come out of the forest."

"If they come around this way, they'll see us."

"They're coming." Barch took round heavy stones in each hand, waited tensely for them.

XI

TWO of the men were dark-skinned, with faces thin and fox-like; the third was lemon-yellow, with a flat round face, orange eyebrows tufted like horns. They moved with a soft stealthy tread that suggested the wariness of deer.

"They've got bows and arrows" muttered Barch. "They can't be either slaves or keepers."

"Perhaps they're fugitives too," said Komeitk Lelianr.

The men drew closer, the sound of their voices came across the marsh. Through the thorns Barch could see every detail of their faces, their clothes. Twenty yards away they stopped short, turned to look down the valley.

Faint in the distance came a sound like a bugle-call, then another from a different direction, then another, startlingly close. The three men hissed in sudden fright, bounded off up the hillside, disappeared under the blanket of black fronds.

Barch uneasily rose to his feet, looked across the lake. "Whatever it is, it's certainly not good . . . We'd better leave too."

Komeitk Lelianr seized his ankle. "Get down," she whispered, "Podruods!"

Barch dropped flat on his face. Out of the forest sprang a lithe red figure. He stood poised, raised his spiked head, called; bugle tones rang across the lake.

He waited. Answering calls like hunting-horns returned from the distance.

The Podruod stood like a statue; Barch and Komeitk Lelianr hugged the marshy ground.

There was a crashing of branches, thudding of hasty feet. A fat man with a conical tuft of pink hair stumbled into the clearing. He saw the Podruod, froze like a bird. The Podruod watched him without moving a muscle. The fat man cautiously started to slip around the lake. The Podruod made a leap forward, halted. Barch thought of a cat with a mouse.

The Podruod once more raised his

head, again the brass voice rang out. Behind the fat man two more Podruods jumped into the clearing. The fat man ran frantically, panting and groaning.

A shadow passed over Barch's head; he looked up with a convulsive jerk that hurt his neck. It was a raft ten feet long, four feet wide, carrying a Klau. If the Klau had looked down he might have seen Barch and Komeitk Lelianr, but his eyes were on the fat man.

Under the raft hung a dark mass, like a bundle of clothes; as the raft slid forward it unfolded, lowered arms like lengths of black hose. They coiled around the fugitive's chest, his legs, his ankles. He stumbled, fell into the thorn-bushes where he lay kicking, thrashing, screaming like a horse.

The raft moved slowly on, dragged him through the bushes, across the mud, into the lake. He sank out of sight. The surface of the lake rippled and boiled. The raft rose; the fat man now hung limp. He was covered with round brown cups. One by one they dropped away, splashed back into the lake. Barch recognized the stinger-molluscs which had jarred his arm. He squeezed himself even flatter into the ground.

The black arms contracted, the fat man was hoisted up, a black mantle dropped in limp folds around him, pinched in at the bottom, became a tight bag.

The raft rose, slid quietly down the valley. Barch turned to look for the Podruods. They had vanished.

He lay flaccid for a moment, then glanced at Komeitk Lelianr. Her eyes were glassy. He nudged her, said in a husky whisper, "Let's run for the trees."

She lay like warm wax, breathing shallowly. Barch gained his feet, scraped the mud from his heels, stood with his knees loose and shaking. He lifted Komeitk Lelianr; half-carried her into the darkness of the forest.

THEY sat for ten minutes, Komeitk Lelianr resting limply on Barch's chest. He stroked her hair, kissed her forehead. Presently she sighed, sat up. Barch asked anxiously, "Feeling better?"

"Yes."

Barch rose to his feet, looked up the hillside where the first three men had taken refuge. "Let's try up there; we might learn something."

Komeitk Lelianr rose passively to her feet. Barch asked, "Are you rested?"

"Yes."

They slowly climbed the hill. Long red-veined black fronds fell around them like weeping willows. They could not see, they could not be seen. On the heavy humus their feet made no sound. Every moment or so Barch stopped to listen. Silence.

Light punctured the wall of fronds. The hillside levelled off, dipped into a basin. The humus thinned, revealing chalky white marl underneath.

Barch heard a quick breath; he spun on his heel. Behind stood a grinning Podruod with a shaved head, wearing a black breech clout and black boots. Slowly, with a fanciful flourish he extended his arm; a sliver of bright steel nearly touched Barch's chest. Barch's eyes shifted behind to a second man, slender, yellowish-white of skin, who had seized Komeitk Lelianr's arms from behind.

Barch hesitated. The Podruod's metallic voice rang out peremptorily. Barch made no reply. He spoke again, this time with harsh emphasis. Barch saw the muscles tense to stab; dimly heard Komeitk Lelianr answering in the same tongue. The Podruod relaxed; death moved back a pace.

The Podruod turned to Komeitk Lelianr, looked her over, up and down. He spoke again; Komeitk Lelianr replied.

"What's he saying?" Barch demanded.

Komeitk Lelianr said in a distant voice, "They want to know if there are any more of us. They're escaped slaves too. The Podruod must be a criminal of some sort."

"Oh." Barch relaxed. "Is that all?"

Komeitk Lelianr said non-committally, "Most of it."

"What do you mean?"

"There seems a kind of tribe living up here." She nodded at the Podruod. "He's the chief."

The Podruod's inspection of Komeitk Lelianr suddenly aroused Barch's apprehension. He said in a hurried monotone, "Throw on the power in your shoes. He's not holding you tightly; you can break away. I'll take off down hill."

Komeitk Lelianr frowned, turned a side-glance at the red man. "We'd be better off here than starving to death alone."

"No," said Barch desperately. "I'll take care of you."

The Podruod with a quick motion sheathed his rapier. He motioned on ahead, pushed Barch's shoulder with a heavy hand.

Shame, rage overcame Barch; he swung a punch. The Podruod grinned, ducked back. The sliver of steel gleamed in the air; he lunged playfully; a quarter inch of steel stabbed Barch's shoulder. Pale with anger and frustration Barch jerked back.

"Roy," cried Komeitk Lelianr, "be sensible! Obey him, or you'll be killed!"

"He's got his eyes on you," panted Barch. "Once we get in that cave, I can't protect you; he'll take you. . . ."

Komeitk Lelianr said wearily, "What's the difference? I've already reconciled myself. . . ."

The steel menaced again; the Podruod barked out roughly. With an agonizing sickness in the pit of his stomach, Barch stumbled forward. "What's the difference?" she had said. The chief was a red-skinned savage, Barch was a light-tan savage. "What's the difference?"

They crossed an open flat, climbed a little slope to the wall of a sheer limestone cliff. The yellow-white man motioned Komeitk Lelianr into a shadowed indentation. At the far end Barch saw a narrow crevice. The first man and Komeitk Lelianr slid into the crevice. Barch followed, groped along a short irregular passage, stumbled into a low-ceilinged hall close after the girl.

Smoky yellow lamps and a blazing fire gave off warm light; there were two rough tables, benches, the smell of food and bodies. Twenty or thirty men and women were visible; others came blinking curiously out of dark corners.

Barch stood tensely, his eyes on Komeitk Lelianr. He muttered feverishly to himself, she never cared for me any more than I care for a dog. . . . I'm just Roy, a good dog. She reconciled herself to me, now what's the difference? There she stood, slender, so lovely and golden that he could see nothing else. . . . She was looking not at Barch, but at the Podruod.

Barch followed her gaze. The chief was giving directions to a pair of men in gray; he turned, called across the cave to where a pot bubbled on the fire. He stood three inches more than six feet: a magnificent creature, wide, thick, without a spare ounce of flesh. His head was shaved; he had hard bony features, and walked in his heavy black boots as lightly as Lekthwans walked on air-sandals. Barch looked anxiously back to Komeitk Lelianr. She still watched the chief; the lamplight reflected flickering in her eyes.

The chief walked over to her, put his hands on her shoulders. She shrank back, but not, thought Barch, as far as she had shrank from him.

Barch, oblivious to everything except two shapes, walked quietly forward. The chief's back was turned. Komeitk Lelianr saw him coming without expression.

The chief turned, negligently reached for his rapier. Barch caught it, yanked it free; it fell tinkling against the stone.

The chief kicked at Barch; Barch seized the foot, pulled. The chief staggered back, hopping with great agility on one foot.

Barch charged forward, stopped a great open-handed slap. He punched, felt the numb jar of blows. Lamps, walls, fires, faces became a meaningless backdrop. The red face was intent, the nostrils flared. Barch twisted the face askew with a haymaker; the face twisted

back without change of expression. Barch felt his wind going, his legs felt like logs, he could hardly raise his arms.

"Ellen," he croaked, "grab a rock, brain him. . . ."

Komeitk Lelianr pressed back against the wall, turned her face away. Three great blows hit Barch. The first was like a lead hammer and the lights faded. The second was like a dark surf washing over him, the third was a rumble of distant thunder.

XII

BARCH awoke on a pile of skins. He sat up, feeling his face. It was puffy and ached dully. At a long table across the room three or four women pounded meal in stone mortars.

At the end sat Komeitk Lelianr. She rose to her feet, bent over a pot, came to Barch with a crockery bowl. "Eat this and you'll feel better."

Barch started to speak, but the words choked in his throat. He took the bowl, drank. Komeitk Lelianr stood watching. Barch said politely, "Nothing more, thank you."

She turned away, then looked back over her shoulder. "Roy, you must learn to think realistically, to limit your idealism by possibility."

"I will," said Barch, "when I'm sure of what's impossible." He handed back the bowl, stared at her coldly. "How're you making out with your new man?"

"Clet?" She shrugged.

"You speak his same language I notice."

"It's a kind of common tongue that everyone knows."

Barch turned his head to the wall. A few minutes later he rose to his feet, staggered outside, leaned against the cliff, vomited.

Raising his head again, he saw a pair of gray men skirting the hillside, carrying a basket between them. Behind came Clet, the Podruod chief, a beast the size of a board slung over his shoulder. His eyes fixed impassively on Barch, he strode inside the cave.

Barch settled himself upon a rock, rubbed his aching head. After a moment he raised his eyes, studied the expanse of the valley. It was shaped roughly like the Mediterranean Sea, with the cave at a position comparable to Libya. High mountains ringed the Levantine end; at Gibraltar the river cut through a narrow steep-walled notch; along the Cote d'Azur he noticed the entrance to a second valley. Directly opposite the cave, in the position of Italy, a great round-knobbed bluff reared up to dominate the valley. Strange, thought Barch, that the Klau maintain no fort up there. Looking closely he thought to see the outline of ruins.

Overcast scudded low over the mountains; a few drops of rain fell. Barch rose to his feet, shivered as a cold blast of wind penetrated the threadbare Modok garment.

He looked tentatively toward the crevice into the cave—inside were Clet and Komeitk Lelianr. He growled wordlessly, walked down the slope away from the cave.

He stopped short. Angrily he asked himself, can't I take it? Am I afraid to go back in? He turned around, marched through the rain back into the cave. The two men with the basket now sat beside it husking a kind of nut. One of them snapped his fingers at Barch, motioned.

Barch glowered, half-turned away. But, he decided, he would look less of a fool working than refusing to work. He could always leave the cave—but why should he? He was free; he was fed and sheltered; there was no reason for him to go, except his outraged vanity. He glanced around the cavern. Neither Clet nor Komeitk Lelianr were in sight.

Barch sat down, began hulling nuts.

WEEKS passed, two, three, a month. Barch mastered the simple routines of the tribe, gained a smattering of the common tongue. On several occasions he went hunting, and once killed a large

brown two-legged creature like a hybrid of kangaroo and lizard, for which he was warmly congratulated.

He explored the cave. Four different passages opened out of the community hall. Two struck off more or less horizontally, winding through small chambers, chapels, nooks, niches and alcoves wherein the tribesmen slept. A third led down past Clet's chamber, dropping into the depths under the mountain. The fourth served as a flue for the fire, led up into an enormous space over the hall called Big Hole. At one end, where the wall was barely a shell, daylight seeped in through a fissure. Stalactites hung, stalagmites rose, occasionally joining to form spindly columns of fascinating height. In Big Hole, Barch arranged his bed of humus and rudely cured hides.

The tribe numbered thirty-four: twenty-one men, ten women, three doubtfuls. These last were the Calbyssinians: Armian, Ardl, Arn, whose sex was a frantically guarded secret. They were slight pretty creatures with melting blue eyes and purple-gold hair. They bundled themselves in loose cloaks, and spent all their leisure time trying to probe out each other's secret. The hints, wiles, sly strategies provided Barch with almost his only amusement.

In addition to the Calbyssinians, there were four Byathids: three tall pink men with foxy eyes, droopy noses, silky cinnamon-colored hair; one pink raw-boned woman with a voice like a sheep.

There was Kerbol, stock and gray-green with a pointed head, a face like a frog, with his dour woman.

There were three hatchet-faced Splangs with skins like Cordovan leather: Chevrr, Skurr and a thin beetle-faced woman that they shared.

There were two Griffits, cat-like men with watchful sidelong eyes, stiff mustaches and an air of vindictive truculence that never quite manifested itself.

There was a large brown man who had lost his nose; his name was Flatface. He controlled two bald and bad-tempered women of unguessable race. There was Pedratz, taffy-colored and smelling of musk, with eyebrows that rose into fantastic horns. There was Moranko, a sullenly handsome youth who hated Clet and presently Barch. There was the dwarf Moses, with a Punchinello face and skin like a piebald horse.

There were six of the bulldog-faced Modoks: four men and two women. They crouched by themselves at the back of the hall, watching everything with wide suspicious eyes.

There was Sl, a white-skinned man with white bifurcated beard and split nose who did everything double; there was the musician Lkandeli Szet. There was Barch; there was Clet and his three women: Komeitk Lelianr and a pair of young nondescripts who had been the original property of Lkandeli Szet.

Making a mental inventory, Barch estimated that at least fifteen races from as many worlds occupied the cave. Sitting quietly at the back bench, he considered the mélange with wry amusement. Never would it be said that his life had been uneventful or drab.

On Earth no one even suspected the existence of Magarak. And yet by this time. . . With a queasiness in his stomach, he speculated on the Klau raid. What had been their purpose?

Across the hall the voices of Flatface's two bald women rose in acrimony. Clet, at the big table in front of the fire, raised his bony red head; the bickering quieted. Clet disliked noise. Here was one reason, thought Barch, for the fact that the tribe so widely disparate in background could live in comparative amity. Another lay in the fundamental nature of their existence, a kind of cultural least-common-denominator, a stage through which each of the races had passed. For Barch, that stage had been only three or four thousand years in the past. He glanced at Komeitk Lelianr, who sat drawing aimless patterns on the table with her fingers. How long had it been since her ancestors lived in caves? A hundred thousand years? A million?

She looked clean and fresh, Barch noticed. Her face was thinner; her mouth had lost something of its girlish curve. Her expression was abstracted, distant, the result of a stoic or fatalistic characterization, Barch decided.

Slowly she looked up. Her eyes rested an instant on Clet. Her eyebrows flickered, but her face showed no change.

Barch rose to his feet, went outside into the darkness. Mist that was not quite drizzle dampened his face. Against the blurred gray of the limestone cliff he noticed a dark shape. His heart stopped for an instant, then started again. It was Kerbol, whom nature had endowed with a skin the color of wet rock, pop-eyes, a mouth like a flap. Barch remembered that Kerbol grumbled about the heat in the hall and seemed to enjoy the cool dampness of the valley.

Barch went to stand beside him; any man that preferred the solitude of the valley to the hall seemed an ally.

KERBOL grunted, and after a moment said in a deep rumbling voice, "The mist falls, the wind blows backwards down Palkwarkz Ztvo. Tomorrow the sky will be high and then the Klau come hunting. Tomorrow will be a good day to stay close by the cave."

Barch remembered the bugling Podruods, the frantic fat man, the Klau raft with the black arms dangling below. "How often do the Klau hunt?"

"Every eight, ten days, if the weather suits. They are the Quodaras District Klau; Palkwarkz Ztvo is their region. The Xolboar Klau hunt in Poriflammes." He pointed to the valley entering the Palkwarkz Ztvo near the mouth.

Sudden enlightenment came to Barch. "So—we live in a hunting preserve; we're tolerated in order to provide the Klau sport!"

"The Klau planet is a week distant; the Klau must amuse themselves."

Barch said thoughtfully, "I could certainly amuse myself hunting Podruods and Klau."

Kerbol digested the idea. "You think in strange directions. Very strange."

Barch laughed sourly. "I don't see anything strange about it. If the Klau hunt me, it's only fair that I hunt them."

"That is not the theory of the hunt." Kerbol spoke politely.

"It's not the Klau theory, it is my theory. Do we have to live by Klau theory?"

"It is a Klau planet; the Klau brought us here."

Barch grinned. "You escaped, you came here. Is that good Klau theory?"

Kerbol said thoughtfully, "It was too hot at the quarry."

A dull explosion from over Kebali Ridge jarred the air of the valley. "There they shoot now," said Kerbol. "Notice the double shock?"

"No."

"The charge was ten cans of abiloid, a twentieth cut of the Super. The Super smashes the rock, the abiloid pushes it down."

"You seem to know a great deal about explosives."

Kerbol nodded gloomily. "Five years I drilled and charged, drilled and charged. And always in the heat. I ran into the forest, and came over Mount Kebali to Palkwarkz Ztvo, where I must take my chances with the hunters."

Barch asked curiously, "What is that black thing that hangs under the Klau raft?"

"Those are—" Kerbol stopped, grasped for a word "—pulling-things. In factories they lift loads. The Klau grow them, they are half-alive."

"The Klau carry other weapons?"

"Yes. They shoot across long distances; a little splinter enters a man's belly, explodes. The man is dead."

Barch looked up and down the dark valley. The mist had risen, a current of air smelling of rotting vegetation blew on his face. From the far distance sounded a harsh clanking, a screech. Barch muttered, "At night a whole regiment of Podruods could come up here."

Kerbol moved uneasily. "That has never happened."

"But it might," said Barch.

"You think strange uncomfortable thoughts," said Kerbol.

On the following day the overcast was high, the wind light. The tribesmen hung close to the cave. But no bugling cries were heard and the Klau did not appear.

The next day was the same, with a near calm across the valley. Again the men of the trible ventured only a few hundred yards from the cliff, and at the evening meal there was only a few scrapings of gruel in the pot.

The third day dawned blustery, with ragged gray clouds breaking over Mount Kebali like surf over a sea-wall.

Clet ordered Flatface, Barch, the Modoks and the Calbyssinians out to grub for meal-nuts, while the remaining men filed into the forest to hunt meat.

The bugling of the Podruods sounded an hour later. Barch and the Calbyssinians jumped up, seized the half-filled bags, hurried back around the hillside.

Across the valley rang the hunting cries, converging near the dominating bluff; looking over his shoulder Barch glimpsed the ominous dark shadow of the Klau raft.

The hunters came filing back to the cave one at a time, wide-eyed with exhaustion.

Across the valley the bugle-calls suddenly ceased. Standing in the crevice Barch saw the black raft slipping down the valley toward the notch.

Four hunters had not yet returned: Clet, Moranko, the two Splangs, Chevrr and Skurr.

Clet slipped in first, his bony red face impassive. Then came Moranko carrying a dead creature that looked like a woolly caterpillar. Minutes passed. Chevrr crossed the flat. He muttered a few words to Clet, jerked his thumb across the valley.

Skurr, the Splang, had been hunted down and killed.

On sudden impulse Barch dropped into the seat opposite to where Clet sat whetting his knife. "I think we should do something about these hunts."

Clet turned him a brief cool glance, returned to his work. Steel rasped on stone, lamplight flickered and winked on the metal as the big red hands methodically stroked. Barch raised his voice. "We don't necessarily need to skulk around this valley." He paused; Clet showed no interest.

Trying to keep anger out of his voice, Barch said, "Every week somebody else gets killed."

"More always come," said Clet. "Too many in the cave is not good."

"Next time the Klau hunt, they might get you—or me." Clet shrugged. "We should hunt them instead—kill the Podruods, kill the Klau."

"No, no," said Clet impatiently. "Then a war-ship comes down to kill us all. We live good now, hey?" He laughed complacently. "Food, women, hey? Same way for many, many years. Best not to change."

Barch rose slowly to his feet, staring in frustration down at Clet, who glanced up impassively, then returned to his whetstone.

Five days passed, low angry days full of rain and stormy gusts that filled Big Hole with eery whistling sounds.

XIII

THE sixth day was quiet, with a high overcast rippled with fish-scale black. Barch sought Clet out at where he ate his breakfast of toasted meat and gruel-cake. "Today the Klau might come again. If we went down to the notch, and hid where they enter the valley—"

Clet shook his head stubbornly, at the same time gnawing a bone.

Komeitk Lelianr knelt by the fire, tending the gruel-cakes which baked on a hot rock. She turned her head, spoke shortly. "Don't argue with him, Roy, He's very single-minded."

Clet looked up. "What does she say?" He dropped the bone, put his wide red hands on the table.

Barch looked down at him in disgust. Blood raced through his body. He felt

strong. Perhaps his wind was better. His voice came out harsh and deep. "Maybe you want to live in a cave all your life like an animal."

Clet's eyes gleamed under the black eyebrows; he seemed to be listening not to Barch so much as to an inner secret voice.

"There's ways of leaving Magarak, if we'd work together."

Clet grunted contemptuously, turned back to his bone. "Now comes the crazy talk."

Barch was taken aback. "Crazy talk?"

Clet's big white teeth glittered in a grin. He flourished the bone toward Komeitk Lelianr. Barch followed the gesture in puzzlement, then suddenly understood.

Komeitk Lelianr pensively prodded the gruel cakes.

"She told me much about you," said Clet. "You are a crazy man; you would fly through space like a magician." His voice rose, his eyes glittered. "Now, no more crazy talk; this is Palkwarkz Ztvo, I am Clet."

Barch slowly went to the mouth of the cave, he took his bow and quiver of arrows.

"Ho!" Clet called out gruffly. "Where do you go?"

"None of your damn business."

Behind came the sudden scrape of the bench; Barch saw Clet reaching for his own bow. He ducked out the cave mouth, ran across the open space. He glimpsed Clet standing in the crevice like a heroic statue of Mars: bow bent arrow tense with imminent mission. Barch flung himself to the ground; the arrow sang over his head. He rose, dodged into the trees where he pulled an arrow into his own bow, waited, pale and shaking.

After a careless survey of the valley, Clet returned inside the cave.

Barch walked morosely down-slope under the flapping fronds. An inglorious exit, he thought. He stopped, looked back toward the cave. He recalled the first time he had seen Komeitk Lelianr, stepping jauntily from the circus-striped space-ball. If she had noticed him at all, it had been as part of the local scene, a native. He felt a sudden glimmer of insight into her mind. Poor devil, thought Barch, she even found Earth food revolting... Well, that was all water under the bridge. And now what? Probably, after Clet's temper had run its course, he could return to the cave. And so the years would pass, while he grew older and his fire died out.

No, said Barch, not if he died today under the Klau raft. He turned, ran at a half-trot to the notch at the valley mouth. He climbed the left-hand slope, settled himself at the narrowest spot.

Time passed. Wind blew chill down the valley, a rim of black clouds loomed past Mount Kebali. A drop touched his nose; only one. The rain hung off in indecision. A poor day to expect the Klau.

He heard the scrape of boots on rock, the soft clang of Podruod voices. Barch tingled with primeval emotion. He sat up straighter, eased his muscles.

Into the valley eight Podruods came trotting, light as dancers in their black boots. Cuirasses covered their chests, black hair-spikes vibrated with each step. A cushioned raft followed, floating three feet off the ground. A young Klau in maroon harness sat fingering a pair of weapons on a rack. He halted the raft, glanced easily around the valley. Barch glimpsed the blood-red stars in his eyes.

The Klau touched controls with his feet, jumped to the ground, stretched. Negligently he conferred with the Podruod sergeant, studied the contours of the valley, pointed.

Six Podruods moved quietly off into the black fronds, two remained behind, squatting a little distance up the valley.

The Klau languidly took one of his weapons—it looked much like a long-barrelled automatic, thought Barch—balanced it in his hand.

Barch eased himself into position. He stretched the bow. . . Now! The arrow hummed down, plunged into the back of the black head.

BARCH crashed down the slope, sprang to the raft, reached across the black body, seized the weapons.

The Podruods said "Oh!"—a soft hiss of outrage and horror.

Barch aimed, pressed the trigger. Nothing. The Podruods loped forward, mouths open in contortions of great rage. Barch clawed a a lever, perhaps a safety lock. He pressed the rigger, the first sprawled on his face. Barch pressed again; the second fell.

Barch listened. Silence except for the murmur of the river, a distant sound of snapping foliage. Now what? He seized the Klau's maroon harness, dragged the body into the undergrowth. He returned to the raft, seated himself; it bounced like a boat under his weight. He put his feet into the controls, experimented.

The raft shook, dodged back and forth, rose up an alarming slant. Barch pulled away his feet; the raft sank slowly. Once more he tried, and presently brought the raft back to the mouth of the valley.

He jumped to the ground, inspected the horrid black bundle under the raft. He took a knife from one of the Podruods, cut at the two bands which held the thing against the raft. It fell to the ground with a sodden spongy sound. Barch gave it a cautious kick, rolled it over, down into the river, where it expanded, opened, lay flaccid.

The next problem was how to deal with the six Podruods still in the valley. He rode the raft up the wall of the notch, settled where he had kept his original vigil. He waited an hour with complete patience. The wind had lost its bite, the sky was high and mild.

A quarter mile up the valley he saw the Podruods, apparently confused by the Klau's ineptitude. Barch laughed quietly. A few minutes later they came diffidently along the valley floor. At the Podruod corpses below him, they stopped in great puzzlement, looking in all directions. Barch aimed, fired swiftly six times. Six men fell as if playing a nursery game.

Barch descended, dragged the bodies into the foliage. The next hunting party might or might not notice the odor of carrion; at the moment Barch did not care especially.

He climbed aboard the raft, flew low over the tree-tops up the valley. A hundred yards from the cave he moored the raft, jumped to the ground. Cautiously he approached the crevice. One of the Modok women, fetching water, looked up without interest. Barch nodded to Kerbol who sat outside scraping at a bow, entered the cave.

Clet looked negligently up from the table. "Here is the crazy man, back from his hunting." He put his big red hands flat on the table, started to rise.

Barch lifted the gun, pressed the trigger. Clet fell forward. Tough on Clet.

Women were screaming in surprise and terror; Fatface bellowed in outrage; after a quick look the Modoks darted white-faced from the hall. Barch said in a voice as casual as he could contrive, "Call everybody in here. I'm running this outfit now and I've got something to say."

XIV

THE cave gradually filled with whispering figures. Barch sat on the table, with his feet on the bench. He looked around the cave. Thirty-two in the tribe with Clet and Skurr dead.

He considered what he had to say—a problem in polemics that would daunt anyone. Thirteen different races, thirty-one different brains; thirteen basic mental patterns, thirty-one sub-varieties. An idea which aroused one would leave another indifferent.

The Modoks had no concept of individualism; Moses had been born into a world of absolute anarchy. Flatface bred his two bald harridans without restraint; the Calbyssinians ached for their perfumed nuptiarii and the anonymity of darkness. The Byathids avidly ate gruel and meat; Komeitk Lelianr swallowed each mouthful with an effort. Kerbol

sweated; Chevrr shivered.

Each mind reacted to its own set of push-buttons; each mind languished in its private kind of inertia. There was no universal catalyst to excite each of the minds, and he certainly could not hope to infect each with his own Earth-type drive. At best he could goad them into action by vigorous leadership. At worst he could rely on the authority of the Klau weapons, and never allow a man behind his back.

He considered the faces around the hall. Lamplight flickered on skins of many colors, reflected from anxious eyes. This was a crazy man, who seemed careless with the death he carried in his hand.

"One thing is important," said Barch, "I did not kill Clet because I hated him. Clet is dead because he was stupid. Clet had to die because he had the mind of a slave. Under Clet you slunk around the hills like animals. The Klau came each week; each week someone was hunted along the valley and killed. In not too many weeks everyone here might expect so to be hunted to death.

"Now, there will be a difference. We are no longer slaves, we are men. When the Podruods come into the valley we will kill them. There is no need to run. We have bows, we have arrows, we will kill."

"Hah!" The exhalation came from one of the Griffits, who stood twirling his little whiskers.

"But this is only incidental. The main thing is escape. I want to leave Magarak. I want to return home. You others, do you wish for your homes?"

There was a mutter of low voices.

"Who says it cannot be done, if we give ourselves entirely?"

Kerbol rumbled stolidly, "You speak wild words. We cannot fly space like moon-dragons."

"There is no way," bawled Flatface.

"Both of you are wrong," said Barch politely. "A few months ago a dozen Lenape escaped. There are a hundred ways. This is my idea." He paused. There was complete silence. "We will steal a barge, build an air-tight compartment upon it. We will load on food and stores, and leave Magarak behind us. The plan is as simple as that. There are difficulties; they must be overcome. The plan is not impossible. We have nothing to lose; are we not already condemned to death by the Klau?

"When we leave Magarak, we will fly for the nearest friendly planet. We will be a long time in space; eventually we will arrive. But from the moment we leave Magarak, we are no longer slaves, or fugitives; we are space-travelers. And when we arrive, we will be heroes, and we will have much to tell our friends and our families."

Once more he looked around the circle of faces. How could they help but alight to his enthusiasm? They must be as eager as he to leave Magarak.

Chevrr, the hatchet-faced Splang, snapped, "Talk is easy. Where will we find this barge? Where will we find materials and tools?"

Barch laughed. "Those are the problems which lie ahead of us. There will be many problems; there will be much work and danger. But if things go well, we will win. What do we have to lose? By acting instead of existing, we stop being animals; we become men."

"Where can we work on such a barge?" came Kerbol's bass rumble. "It will be seen from the air. The Klau will land a crew and fly it away."

"One place I know of," said Barch, "is Big Hole. The outside wall is a shell; light comes in through fissures. We will break an opening, slide the barge through, then pile rock back up. . . Now what do you say? I cannot build a spaceship alone; are you with me?"

Looking around the faces, he saw passivity, confusion, stupidity. He also saw here and there glimmerings of hope, imagination, enthusiasm. His eyes met Komeitk Lelianr's, where she stood by the wall, a pale golden figure, silent, disassociated.

Kerbol rumbled, "It is worth trying.

We lose nothing. We will try."

"Good," said Barch with a tight smile. "I see you are all with me. But in case—" he looked casually down at the sprawled red body of Clet. "—any others think like Clet, now they should speak."

No one spoke.

"Excellent," said Barch with a rather broader smile. He jumped down to the floor. "First things first. Before we liberate a barge we need a place to hide it."

He took up a lamp, climbed the passage into Big Hole. The tribe hesitated, then one by one followed.

Damp gray walls glistened in the yellow light; shadows sagged and danced. Where the passage came up from the hall, the floor was almost level in an area a hundred feet square. Ridges of agate jutted up at the opposite end, where the wall was thin.

Barch crossed to the far wall, climbed up the loose detritus. "Here is where we'll open out. Quite a job but it's got to be done."

Kerbol grunted. "With a few cans of abiloid I could blast a hole as easy as husking a nut."

Barch considered him thoughtfully. "You worked at the stone quarry over the hill."

"Five long years."

"You know where they keep the explosives?"

Kerbol grunted.

"Tonight," said Barch, "you and I'll visit the stone quarry."

NIGHT had filled Palkwarkz Ztvo for two hours when Barch and Kerbol climbed aboard the Klau raft. Mist blew on their faces as the raft rose; the mountain-side below was featureless as crumpled black cloth, except for a single spark of light, winking on the flat before the cave.

Kerbol touched Barch's arm. "Over there, up over Mount Kebali; then down."

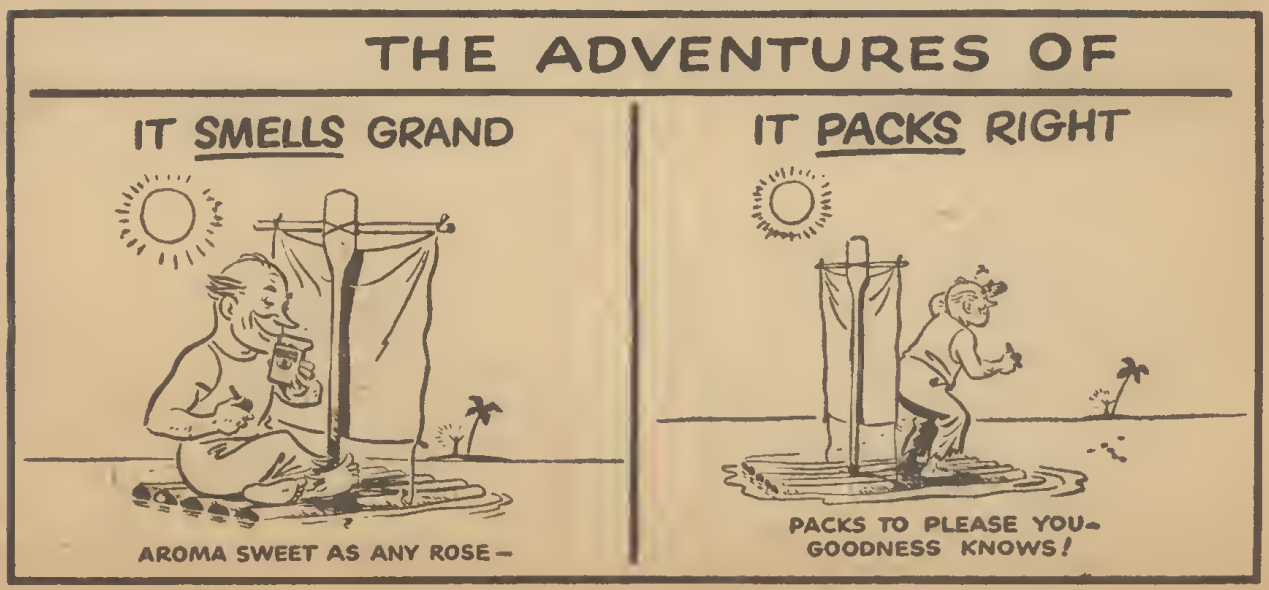
Barch nodded. The raft drifted up into a region of fog. Mount Kebali loomed ahead like an underwater reef, they crossed fifty feet over the scoured rocks.

Down on the slope appeared a lonesome cluster of lights, far beyond lay the luminous blur that was Quodaras District.

"Kerbol," said Barch to the dark shape behind him, "in this project we've got to trust each other like brothers—and also take sensible precautions. What, in your opinion, are the chances of someone in the tribe betraying us to the Klau?"

Kerbol made a rumbling sound. "The chances are nonexistent. The traitor would gain nothing. The Klau would not take such a crazy tale seriously—"

"Mmph," said Barch.



"—The tale-bearer would be sent to the arsenic mines as an escaped slave. True," he went on, "there are some with small urge to leave Palkwarkz Ztvo; life on their home worlds is no better. On the other hand, some highly-ranked planets are represented in the tribe—my own, Perdu, Calbys, Koethena, Lekthwa." He paused. Barch said nothing.

Kerbol spoke on, "I will be glad to see my home village; it lies in the plain of Sponis, which is blue with turf and runner lichen, and there runs the river Erth."

"Earth?" said Barch. "That is the name of my planet."

"Earth?" Kerbol rolled the word on his tongue. "I have never heard of it." He ruminated a moment. "You must be wild and fanciful dreamers on Earth. I have slaved twelve years on Magarak, lived a free man in Palkwarkz Ztvo for two; never have I known anything so daring."

"It seems to me the first thing a man would think of."

The lights of the quarry shifted, spread slowly apart like the opening of a marvelous bright night-flower. The sight awoke in Barch the dream-end of a recollection. Where had he known another such opening-out of lights?

He sighed. Magarak night suddenly seemed harsh and bitter. Long long ago he had dropped Markel's air-boat toward a little village to buy lipstick for Komeitk Lelianr. He looked down at the stone quarry. "They must work all night."

"The quotas are hard; much stone goes for ocean reclamation. Notice," Kerbol pointed, "that north face is next on schedule; they drill now for blasting. And there—" once more he pointed—"is the explosive's depot. The barge comes loaded, slides into the depot; empty, it slides out, and in slides a new load."

"And what precautions are taken?"

Kerbol shrugged. "First, an electrified fence which we will fly over. If there are alarm lines, we will avoid them also. Inside the warehouse will be a few Podruods, gaming or asleep, Bornghaleze dispatchers who load orders onto an outgoing belt.

"We'll take them as they come."

The raft dropped, the quarry lights expanded. Ticking of hammers, intermittent grate of machinery came loud across the damp night. Bright blue points of fire showed where torches melted blast-pockets into rock. On the roof of the warehouse were outlined four dull squares of light—ventilation cupolas.

Barch lowered the raft to the roof, stepped off, walked carefully to a cupola. He eased his head into the light, looked down. He felt a tread behind him: Ker-

[*Turn page*]

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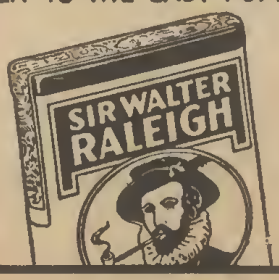

It costs no more to get the best!

bol. Barch said, "There's nothing here! The place is clean, empty."

Kerbol bent his head. "True," he muttered. "There's not even a sack of blow-powder." He straightened, looked at the rock face a half-mile away, then bent his head over the ventilator again. "Even the barge is gone."

Barch eyed the sky. "How soon will new supplies get here?"

Kerbol shrugged. "Tomorrow, tonight. . . ."

"Look," said Barch, "those red lights."

"That's the new load."

"Come on," said Barch. He sprinted to the raft.

"What now?" asked Kerbol, as Barch swung the raft into the air.

"Maybe we'll get more done tonight than we bargained for." He pushed the speed pedal down hard, swept out wide, circled, approached the barge from the stern. "Where's the pilot?"

Kerbol pointed. "In the dome at the prow."

"Be ready with your gun." He skimmed in over the barge, dropped to the deck. "I'll take the pilot, you handle the rest of the ship." He ran stealthily forward; the pilot was a sharp-featured silhouette, eyes on the lighted rectangle of the warehouse. Barch wrenched open the door to the dome.

"Take the barge up. . . Up, quick!" He pointed the gun. The pilot, a beady-eyed little man with a thin dark face cast a startled look over his shoulder. Barch said, "Quick—up!"

The pilot turned reluctantly to the controls. "I must follow my schedule, or the dispatcher will—"

"You're a dead man," growled Barch, "unless we're moving up right now!" He jabbed hard with the gun barrel. "Up!"

"We're going up!" said the pilot peevishly.

"Faster!" Barch looked over the side. "Now, back the way you came."

The barge swept away from the quarry. "Now—out with those side-lights," said Barch.

"I'm not allowed to," protested the pilot. "It's a punishable offense."

Barch grinned, tapped him on the back of the skull with the gun barrel. "Out with the lights!" He looked quickly over his shoulder. "Any crew aboard?"

"No crew. I load at Phrax District Chemical Complex, discharge at the warehouse."

"What's your cargo?"

"Explosives, general supplies."

Barch heard footsteps; Kerbol looked in.

"All in order?"

"Nobody aboard."

"Good." Barch backed out of the dome, motioned Kerbol in. "You steer him, you know the lay of the land."

Barch went over by the edge of the barge, looked out into the darkness. Step one. Achievement. He felt the bulwark—chill hard metal, the same hard metal which one day would lift him clear of Magarak out into great space.

XV

THE barge slid up the slopes of Mount Kebali. The sounds of the quarry faded; the lights contracted to a tight cluster. The sea of trembling luminescence, the factories, furnaces, mills and yards of Quodaras District now lay astern.

Barch took a proprietary stroll around the deck. It was rectangular, eighty feet long, fifty feet wide; the cargo was stacked ten feet high—surely not all explosives. Even on an Earthly scope, here was enough potential to pulverize half Mount Kebali.

He circled the catwalk, looked into the dome. "Faster." The barge lurched under his feet; he staggered back into the cargo. The craft had quite a power-plant, he thought—all to the good if ever they reached space.

Moisture suddenly sprayed his face; they were driving through fine rain. He stumbled up into the lee of the dome.

The rain stopped, the barge broke out of the mist into a biting wind. Barch noticed the pilot's head suddenly twist. Turning, he saw the running-lights of

another barge at their left hand. He walked to the rail with his gun ready. . . . The barge drifted across their bow, disappeared into the cloud bank.

Palkwarkz Ztvo lay below, a dark wilderness. Barch strained his eyes for the wan flicker of light. Like a faint star at the horizon, it eluded him. He put his head into the dome, asked Kerbol, "Can you see our light?"

Kerbol pointed. "There." He nudged the pilot. "Land beside that light."

"Impossible," muttered the pilot. "We are over Palkwarkz Ztvo—wild-man country. They'll put us in their pots."

"No, they won't," said Barch. "Land beside the light."

The barge sank. Blackness blacker than the sky reached up past them; there was a crash, a snapping of foliage. The raft touched ground.

Barch looked warily out into the darkness. All was quiet. He turned to the pilot. "Get out."

The pilot hesitated, clinging to the protection of his dome. "What are you going to do with me?"

"Nothing."

The pilot jumped, made a quick dash for the underbrush. Barch tackled him around the knees; both fell into the soggy humus. Barch rose, seized the man by the collar of his jacket, marched him back past the barge, up the slope. Kerbol came after like a stealthy gray bear.

Barch entered the hall with the pilot. The entire tribe was huddled around the great table talking heatedly; Barch stood watching the play of firelight on the un-earthly features.

There was a hiss, the talk halted; faces swung around as if operated by a lever.

Barch gave the pilot to Kerbol. "Lower him into one of the potholes on a rope." He turned back to the big table. "We've two or three hours work outside. Let's get it over with. Bring out your knives and axes."

There was uneasy movement, slow uncomfortable rising to the feet. Barch watched impassively.

Flatface said in a surly voice, "Work is for daytime. This is night. Let the work wait." The others watched anxiously, poised and uncertain as rabbits.

This was the first test, the most important. Barch made no sudden move. He waited, let the suspense build up. Flatface nervously glanced at Barch's gun. Barch said softly, "Where is your axe, Flatface?"

Flatface motioned to the wall. "There it lies."

"Get it!"

Flatface slowly gained his feet. Barch jumped two quick steps forward. There was a startled swaying back. "Everybody! Outside!" He took the two lamps, went to the entrance, waited while the tribesmen filed out past him.

In the lamplight the barge was a large dark shape, vastly more impressive than words Barch could have used inside the cave. "There's your spaceship."

The tribesmen muttered with awe, excitement.

"Tomorrow we'll unload the cargo, but tonight we've got to cover it over with branches so it can't be seen from above."

BARCH pulled himself up from his couch with the first glimmer of light. He pulled on the Modok smock, more threadbare than ever after repeated scrubbings with wood-ash, went out to inspect the barge. It seemed to fill half the flat, like a whale in the front yard.

To check the camouflage he mounted the raft, floated up into the sky. The forest was a matted black tangle, the barge an extension of the same tangle. Satisfied, he dropped back to the ground.

It was not improbable that the Klau would catch wind of their plans, with subsequent violent reaction. What weapons might they bring to bear? A bomb would do little more than splinter the mountain-side. Torpedoes against the side of the cliff would have greater effect. There was poison gas, flame, disease, all the conventional Earth weap-

ons, and Klau weapons he knew nothing of. Barch could not talk away a peculiar sense of futility. Any serious effort woud surely destroy them.

It was essential that the Klau remained ignorant of his plans. He must avoid giving them provocation. In one sense, killing the Klau yesterday was a mistake. But it had been necessary—an act which had given him an aura of power that killing Clet ten times would have failed to do. In the future he might have to back down on some of his fire-eating threats. Avoid the Podruods as best as possible; fight if cornered.

He circled the barge. The seamless hull rose four feet over his head. He tried to visualize a super-structure, and achieved only the picture of a deck-house on a sea-going freighter.

He climbed aboard. About half the cargo was crates of various sizes. Toward the bow lay four bundles of heavy pipe, a half-dozen mechanisms, apparently drill-torches, a dozen spools of smooth cable. A good haul, thought Barch. He revised his mental picture from a deck-house to a dome of air-tight fabric over the barge, held down against air-pressure by a net of cables.

He jumped to the ground, returned to the hall. Standing by the fire, he watched the women set out pots of gruel to boil. Komeitk Lelianr slipped into the hall from a crevice to the left. Clet's private chamber, which she had occupied the night before, lay off the passage down into the mountain. She met his eyes, looked away.

If only he could read her mind, thought Barch. He watched while she unobtrusively busied herself. The old pang which he thought he had put behind him, came stealing back to hurt his throat. He watched her more openly, and knew that she felt his scrutiny. If he wanted her again, she was his, by a kind of murky inevitable common-law.

Abruptly he turned his back, looked into the fire, torn by rising heats and emotions. The first time he had seen her, she represented a challenge; she challenged him now by her sheer presence. Then he had sought recognition for his race. Now the issue was personal. He turned his head, met her eyes again. What went on behind the quiet golden gaze?

Kerbol came blinking into the room, followed by the dour woman who was his mate. Barch felt a sudden sense of warmth, companionship. He had at least one friend in Palkwarkz Ztvo.

After breakfast he took Kerbol out to the barge, to inspect the cargo. Kerbol snapped open a crate marked with black and red symbols; inside were cannisters the size of apples.

"Those are abiloid," said Kerbol, "a slow explosive. This—" he opened a smaller crate, which held dense semi-metallic bars supported on a red plastic rack "—is Super."

"Super—what?"

Kerbol shrugged. "Super is what they call it at the quarry. A small cut of Super is equal to ten crates of abiloid. But it's fast. It smashes. Abiloid pushes."

"I hope you can detonate them."

Kerbol picked out one of the cans of abiloid, touched a wisp of thread. "This is the three minute timer. To detonate the Super, you set it under a can of abiloid."

"It's all yours," said Barch. "There are your torches. Pick yourself a helper and open out Big Hole."

Barch returned to the cave, sent Flat-face out in charge of a hunting crew.

At noon Kerbol reported the cave-wall ready for firing. Barch doubtfully eyed the sky. Fog was creeping down the slope of Mount Kebali. "We'd better wait till dark. Then if any Klau fly over, the hole in the mountain won't hit them in the eye."

By mid-afternoon, the fog shrouded Palkwarkz Ztvo. Barch signalled Kerbol. "Set off your shots."

A FEW minutes later six blasts sent streamers of mist flying.

Barch entered the hall, took the down

passage past Clet's old chamber, leaned over the glass-walled bubble at whose bottom sat the pilot. "Feel like working?"

The pilot looked up sullenly. "Kill me and have done."

"I don't want to kill you. I need your help. I wouldn't keep you in this hole if I thought you wouldn't run away."

The pilot's face became instantly cheerful. "I have nowhere to go; I cast my lot with yours."

Barch grinned. "That's a sensible decision, quickly arrived at." He lowered the rope, the pilot jerked himself up nimbly.

Barch took him to the barge, pointed to the gap into Big Hole. "I want the barge inside."

The pilot swung himself quickly into the dome. "The work of an instant."

Barch climbed aboard behind the pilot. "We'll fly in together."

"As you wish," said the pilot peevishly.

The barge rose off the ground, glided up the slope, inched inside the gap. Two fires burned on a level area at the far end. "Land between the two fires," said Barch.

The barge slid through dimness. Stalactites, stalagmites clicked and crashed to the floor.

The barge grounded. Barch saw Kerbol already had men at work piling rocks back into the opening. He turned to the pilot. "How is it that the Klau trust you with a barge? Aren't they afraid you'll escape to the hills?"

The pilot made a supple gesture. "What would I gain? We pilots live well. In the hills the wild men eat each other like garfish."

Barch forebore to challenge the statement. "What would happen if you went back now?"

"I would be discredited."

Barch studied the pilot's mercurial face. "I don't want to kill you," he said slowly.

"No of course not."

Barch ruminated further. "But I don't want the Klau to come looking for their barge."

"Far from likely."

"Unless you carried them tales."

The pilot blew out his cheeks. "My loyalty is yours forever."

"No one here but you knows how to pilot the barge. In a sense, you are essential to the success of our plan."

"And what is this plan?"

"There's no harm telling you. We'll build an airtight hatch over the barge and leave Magarak."

"Ah." The pilot nodded. "Now, indeed, I will join you."

"Now? Your previous promises could not have been sincere."

"You misunderstand. We of Splang are very delicate in our meanings."

"Chevrr up there is a Splang; I have no difficulty understanding him."

The pilot hissed contemptuously. "He is the mountain stock, a crude uncouth race. We of the coast forests are a different people entirely."

"Well, no matter," said Barch. "I'll take a chance on you. What's your name?"

The pilot said something like, "T'ck-T'ck-T'ck."

"I'll call you Tick," said Barch. "You understand that I'll think poorly of any attempt to visit Quodaras?"

"Certainly. That's to be expected."

"Then help fill the hole with rock. I'll talk more to you later."

XVI

BARCH sat studying his list of the tribe members, a heterogeneous crew. There were the three Splangs, Tick, Chevrr, Chevrr's small dark woman; there was Kerbol and his dour gray mate; Flatface and his two quarreling bald half-breeds; the Calbyssinians, whose sex still remained mysterious; Pedratz, taffy-colored and smelling like a bull; Sl, the double-goer; Lkandeli Szet, the musician; the six silent Modoks; five Byathids; Moses, the dwarf; the handsome youth Moranko;

the cat-like Griffits, who had silently asserted rights to the first two of Clet's women; there was himself and Komeitk Lelianr.

Of technical skills useful in the conversion of a cargo barge to a space-ship, there was a depressing paucity. Pedratz claimed a knowledge of welding; Kerbol displayed familiarity with explosives; Tick could fly the barge. But who knew anything about air purification, who could repair drive-circuits, who knew the lore of space navigation?

Barch, looking unseeingly into the fire, drumming his fingers, suddenly became aware of covert scrutiny, doubtful eyes. He stopped drumming, relaxed. Confidence bred confidence; be confident, Barch told himself, Be arrogant in your confidence. But confidence by itself would hardly produce the program which somehow he must evolve.

The first thing to do was isolate the problems, work on each by itself. First, there must be greater security against the Klau. Barch critically inspected the opening to the cave, where nothing prevented Podruods from stepping in to kill them all.

He rose to his feet, walked through the winding crevice out into the night. Darkness everywhere. The wind roared down the valley, the great black leaves flapped a melancholy under-tone, like surf on a rocky beach. Behind him the faintest glimmer of light shone out the crevice.

Tomorrow he would arrange some kind of trip-alarm system around the clearing . . . There was still tonight. Barch returned within. Nearest the opening sat two Calbyssinians, Ardl and Arn busy at their incomprehensible love-making, each trying to divine the others sex. Barch knelt beside them, took off his wrist-watch. "Tonight we keep guard. You two will watch first, for as long as it takes this little finger to move from here to here. Then one of you will wake—" he looked over his shoulder—"the two Griffits. Come outside and I will show you where you must station yourselves. It's important."

At the cave mouth he said, "Arn, you stand here; Ardl, you walk quietly through the forest at the edge of the clearing. At every circuit report to Arn. Change off if you like. When you wake the Griffits, give them the same instructions."

Returning inside he set four more watches, himself taking the middle watch with Kerbol.

One problem temporarily shoved back out of the way.

Tick, the hatchet-faced pilot, was engaged in conversation with Chevrr, his brittle country-man. Barch joined them. Did you work out of a central transportation depot?"

"Yes, I made the trip once every two weeks, sometimes oftener."

"But you took freight elsewhere?"

"Oh, indeed."

"How did you get your assignments? Did you work out of a central transportation depot?"

"Correct. My depot is—was—Quodaras Thirteen, and every day I might receive a different assignment."

"You must know Magarak well."

Tick preened himself. "As well as any man can know it."

"What if there was freight for a strange location?"

"There is always the locator in the dome."

"Locator?" Barch pricked up his ears. "A chart?"

Tick said with airy superiority, as if he himself had designed the mechanism, "No, no. Much more complicated and complete. It's a three-dimensional viewbox, indexed to all parts of Magarak."

"Let's look at this locator."

Tick spoke volubly as they climbed the winding passage to Big Hole. "—A good barge, a fine sleek barge, fresh-fueled, and why? Because I, Tick, have done favors for Goleimpas Gstad, Dispatcher for Quodaras Thirteen: a Bornghaleze, very influential. 'Tick,' says Gstad, 'the range of the hangar is yours; select a barge which reflects your

own excellence.' So daily I watch the route-strip and only two days past comes a barge fresh from the growth-vats—"

"Growth-vats? Do they grow the barges, too?"

"Indeed." Tick turned Barch a look of surprise. "Do you not grow ships and vessels on your planet?"

"No," said Barch, "we use different methods."

"If you arrive home, as I confidently expect, you will be a great innovator. It is all a matter of selecting the correct secretors, of priming them with responsible fluids and directing the growth with care. As a result—" They rounded the sharp chunk of marble agate at the top of the passage, stepped out into Big Hole. Tick waved at the sleek black hulk silhouetted against the firelit limestone wall.

BARCH stopped, impressed by the magnitude of his acquisition. "How do you refuel the barge?"

Tick made a disdainful gesture. "I am the pilot. I am never concerned with such matters . . . However, the accr is inserted in the hatch under the dome."

"How much? How often?"

Tick blocked a rectangle six by three inches in the air. "Once a month perhaps, a new charge is inserted."

Fuel shortage would be no problem, thought Barch. *Accr* was evidently an atomic fuel, compressed electricity, solidified radiation. It made no real difference so long as he could lay his hands on enough of it.

Tick sprang nimbly into the dome. Barch thought with a grim humor that if Tick ever made it into the trees, he'd be a hard man to catch. He followed more sedately. Tick was peering with interest into a glowing slit, a trifle to the left of the seat. "Ha, hm."

Barch waited impatiently. "Well?"

"Quodaras Thirteen is very active; I was watching the traffic."

"Let's see." Barch pressed Tick out of the way, looked inside the slit.

His first impression was of looking at a glowing, fleshy abstract painting. There were pink blocks, orange squares, feathery light-blue towers. Black lines webbed the pattern; almost invisible squares of white film floated above. Sparks of every conceivable color drifted slowly over the panorama. "Those sparks," asked Barch, "what are they? Barges?"

"Correct," said Tick cheerfully. "Each district has a distinct color; Quodaras Thirteen is pale green."

Barch said in a strained voice, "This barge shows as a green spark?"

Tick hesitated, as if troubled by a passing thought. "Well, yes."

"Show me on the chart."

Tick slowly twirled a knob, glanced into the slit. "There is Palkwarkz Ztvo. And there—"

Barch peered down at a pale gray physiographic outline of the mountains. A green spark showed dimly against the mountainside.

Barch looked up quickly. Tick was sidling restlessly toward the door. "Come back here."

Tick crossed the dome with a cheerful expression on his face.

"How do you disconnect whatever is broadcasting our position?"

Tick's eyes wandered toward a little knob joined by a chain to the box. "Best not think of it."

Barch leapt forward like a leopard. Tick's eyes popped in alarm. "Disconnect that light, or I'll kill you right here!"

Tick babbled in a frenzy, "It's not allowed; Goleimpas Gstad would discredit me completely."

Barch tightened his fingers around the pipe-stem throat. Tick's eyeballs protruded an incredible distance. Barch released the pressure. "Disconnect that light!"

Tick, moaning and wheezing, bent over the box, tenderly broke the chain, slid back a plate, punched a glossy green bubble. "Gstad will reduce me to the manure belts."

Barch looked into the viewer. The pale-green spark had disappeared.

Barch turned back to Tick, who was feeling his neck. Tick said quickly, "There are other useful aspects to the locator. Observe. If I would return to Quodaras Thirteen Hangar, I find the name on this index . . ." He gave a rotary spindle a whirl, characters glowed and spun. "Then I touch this cell here—" he looked up plaintively as Barch grabbed his wrist.

Barch growled, "You don't seem to worry much about your life expectancy."

Tick made a chattering sound with his teeth. "A Splang Coaster defies death. The exact hour of his passing is chronicled at his birth in the beach sand. No act of God, Klau or man can mar the chart of his life."

"A good comfortable philosophy," said Barch without interest. He looked into the locator again. "I suppose every Klau on Magarak knows where the barge is by now?"

"Possibly, possibly not," said Tick. He pursed his lips thoughtfully. "It depends a great deal on how rapidly the lack of explosive at the quarry will be reported to the coordinator."

"And what's the coordinator?"

Tick said with an air of complete candor, "I don't know."

"What do you think it is?" asked Barch patiently.

"I assume it to be a mechanical brain, that notes and integrates apparently unrelated occurrences, calculates the most likely causes of effects and effects of causes."

"Oh," Barch nodded. "A kind of mechanical super-detective." He turned back to the locator. "Can this thing be detached? I'd like to take it down to the hall."

"Certainly, indeed." Tick sprang to the locator, snapped loose a pair of clips.

"I'll take it," said Barch. He motioned to the cave floor. "After you."

Tick jumped nimbly to the ground, started toward the passage down to the hall.

Barch said in a casual voice, "What's the hurry?"

Tick stopped short, turned Barch a quick smile. "None whatever."

Barch climbed to the floor with the locator under one arm, and ostentatiously hitched at the weapon in his belt. "Now we'll go down."

XVII

IN THE hall Barch set the locator on the table, went to look out into the night. Arn and Ardl, lounging close together, sprang apart with a guilty start. "Damn it," cried Barch, "if you can't stop lovemaking or whatever you call it long enough to stand watch, I'll strip you naked and then there'll be an end to this foolishness."

Ardl went smartly on his rounds. Barch turned to Arn. "Don't let that Splang pilot get past you."

"No, Roy."

Barch looked up into the sky. Suppose the position of the barge had been noted. If so, a barge-load of Podruod troops might drop down at any minte. He shrugged. If they came, they came. "Keep a good look-out, especially up into the sky."

Back in the hall, Tick was seated on the table, a hand placed proprietarily on the locator. "Many pilots fly dead; they set the cell, they sleep. Not I. I look at my locator—" he patted the box "—I fly with my hands." He held up his hands. The fingers ended in knobs, like a tree-toad's.

Barch saw Chevrr sitting in a corner watching scornfully. He crossed the room, squatted beside him. "Are all his race like him?"

Chevrr nodded dourly. "We stay in the mountains to avoid them. They breed twins once a year, they swarm in the trees, they are worthless except as acrobats and prostitutes."

"But how can I control him?"

"Kill him."

Barch grimaced. "I find killing hard to get used to. Besides he is the only one who can fly that barge."

The folds of Chevrr's gloomy face went through an amazing process of opening, smoothing, widening. Chevrr was smiling. "He wears a lucky charm; all coast-folk do. It is his birth sac, with the diagram of his beach-sands. You will find it inside a leech which sucks at his belly. Take this charm and you are his master."

"Ah," said Barch.

"Be careful. If he knows what you plan, he becomes a demon, a giant. No one in the room could hold him."

Barch stood up, went to Kerbol, spoke briefly, passed on to Flatface, then to Moranko.

Barch went to the table, moved the locator to the side of the room. Tick weighed no more than a hundred thirty pounds. He looked stringy and agile.

Kerbol and Flatface came up behind. Each seized an arm; Moranko grasped the spidery legs.

Tick looked up in sudden wonder. Barch stepped forward, pulled up the front of his yellow blouse.

Tick's eyes popped forward until more was out than in. He writhed his shoulders, Kerbol and Flatface were dragged half across the table. He tensed his legs; incredibly Moranko was jerked a foot from the floor.

There on the sweating writhing skin was a flat brown spot. Barch pulled it free with his fingernails. Two objects dropped to the stone floor of the cave: a metal locket and the leech which humped sluggishly toward the fire. Tick leaned down at the locket, his eyes protruded as if on stalks. He drew his arms forward; Flatface and Kerbol, panting and gasping, came across the table like pillows. Barch picked up the locket, snapped it open, drew out a wisp of membrane.

"Tick," said Barch, "sit still."

Tick's eyes receded into his head. Kerbol and Flatface gained their feet.

"Tick," said Barch, "will you behave?"

Tick sighed. "My life is no longer my own."

"Not one of us here owns his life. We're in this together; we'll leave Magarak together or we'll die together. Do you understand that?"

Tick made no answer. His eyes sought out Chevrr's, as if seeking sympathy.

Barch said, "Where I go, your charm goes. When we get free of Magarak, you'll have it back."

Tick said nothing.

Barch returned the locator to the table, looked in at the pulsing pastel landscape. "What are those transparent white squares?"

"I don't know," said Tick.

"What are the black lines?"

"Those are the underground belts."

"I see a bright orange spot with things like fish bones waving on top. How would I find out what place that is?"

Tick looked. "That's on the Ptrsfur Peninsula, Zcham District."

"How do you know?"

"The signs are on the strip at the top."

"And the orange block?"

Tick twisted a knob. A black dot moved across the panorama, centered on the orange block. Tick pointed to a line of glowing orange symbols on the cylinder at the side. "There you will read the function of the block."

Barch scrutinized the symbols. "Can you read them?"

"No."

BARCH glanced around the room. Komeitk Lelianr sat looking into the fire watching scenes far across space. "Ellen, can you read this?"

Indifferently she came to look. "The manufacture of *padisks verktt*."

"And what is that?"

" 'Padisks' is number nine in series ten—or eleven—of the artificial elements. *Verktt* are a kind of radiation valves."

Barch grunted. "Oh." He tentatively turned the dial again. "This thing

should be a big help to us." He looked around. No one appeared to be excited. "It's a great piece of luck."

Flatface pressed his agate eyes against the slit, twisted the dial. "Ah—there is the Purpurat, where I wound bobbins four years."

Barch turned to Komeitk Lelianr, who seemed familiar, understandable—an illusion, he realized; in essence her mental make-up was as alien to his as that of Sl, the pale double-goer. "Tick told me about a Magarak coordinator—a calculating machine of some kind."

"Yes," said Komeitk Lelianr. "A manufacturing world is coordinated by what is called a 'brain'—a scheduling machine, which keeps the elements of the world running efficiently."

She twisted the locator dial, reading the characters. Barch watched a moment. "Ellen, it looks like you've got yourself a job."

She nodded without interest. Barch was fascinated by a new thought. "It means," he said somberly, "that we'll have to work together."

She inspected him with mild curiosity. "Why should we not?"

Barch flushed. The idea had seemed important. "No reason whatever." He glanced around the table to see if his discomfiture had been noticed. Eyes were on him; eyes black, blue, white, red, slat-green. He said gruffly to the hall at large, "We might as well talk this project over."

He waited, there was no reply. They were, perhaps, not accustomed to talking things over.

"We've got the barge," said Barch. "My idea was to fit on some kind of airtight balloon, net it over with cable."

There was silence. Barch looked around the table. Moses, the dwarf, threw wood on the fire. Barch edgily said, "I don't see why it wouldn't work, but I'm no space-ship engineer. Maybe somebody has a better idea."

As soon as he spoke he felt more uncomfortable than ever— His voice had been querulous. A leader must be completely positive . . . But how, he asked himself, how to avoid the inevitable cross-balancing, the constant internal comparison of attributes and effectiveness when surrounded as he was by a dozen strange races? It was a constant challenge to measure up to the best of the universe . . . Barch sighed, gave up. This kind of thinking led to ulcers.

Komeitk Lelianr said off-handedly, "Far simpler to obtain another barge, and weld the two of them face to face."

Barch sat perfectly still a moment, to make sure of himself. "That sounds like a very good idea." He paused. "There's a point to consider. In space we'll depend on the lift units for propulsion, so that we can keep to our feet. I hope for at least one gravity constant acceleration, which will bring us to light-speed —or as close as possible—in somewhere near a year. After that—I don't know. Earth theoretical scientists are convinced that light-speed is the ultimate."

Komeitk Lelianr smiled faintly. "Earth scientists have little practical experience in space-travel."

Barch continued as if he had not heard. "The point I was trying to make was, if we carry the extra mass of a second barge, can we reach that acceleration?"

"Certainly. More easily than with only one barge. You will have available the lift of both barges; they work on a positive-negative principle, like electric-magnets."

Barch, a little at a loss, said, "Oh. I didn't know."

Pedratz, the taffy-colored, said, "Two coils of welding tape, two hours and two barges are one!"

Barch rose to his feet, walked outside to check on the Calbyssinians. Arn, standing alone by the doorway, gave him an aggrieved glance. Barch bent to look at the wrist-watch. "Your time's about up. I'll send out your relief."

He returned within, gave the Griffits instructions, went out with them, explained the wrist-watch, then came back to the table, with the feeling of return-

ing into a chess match. He said, "Before we weld the barges together, it might be a good idea to deck over the first barge, with the effect of doubling our floor space. Also, we'd better install whatever machinery we need—the air conditioners, water condensers, the—"

Komeitk Lelianr said, "Lekthwans use a single unit, a sustenator. Carbon dioxide and water vapor are extracted from the air; water, oxygen are produced, as well as basic food-stuff. The Klau presumably employ something similar."

Barch wondered if she might be deliberately flaunting her superior knowledge. Probably not, he decided wearily; it wouldn't occur to her as desirable. He looked for Tick. "Hey, Tick—where do the Klau build space-ship sustenators?"

Tick came over to the Locator, twisted the knob. "That's the growing plant for the shell down there—the black and green. The final assembly is at Stalkoa-Skel, Magdkoa District, on the fourth tier. I once picked up a cargo for the space-works on Gdoa." He twisted the dial. "There, the red block."

XVIII

IT WOULD be easier, thought Barch, if I weren't so darned nervous. He studied the rock-colored hulk to his right. Kerbol had no more nerves than a lizard. Ahead was the thin crouched back of Tick, piloting the raft, completely at ease, making a chirping cricket sound with his lips.

Barch looked back over the side. They flew low; under and among a stream of barges, cars, rafts, spheres and occasional flashing snapping objects like sheets of silver lightning. Overhead rose the massive sooty towers of Magarak, crowding the sky, crowding the imagination. Even higher, feathery trusses flickered back and forth; smoke boiled and drifted. Colored flares fumed and dazzled; the air rolled with sound: clanging, chugging, roaring, hissing.

On Earth, thought Barch, this would drive men crazy. Are Magarak workers sounder stuff? Perhaps it doesn't matter whether human brains hold out or not; perhaps labor is cheaper than sound-proofing.

Tick flew confidently, almost happily, as if he were in a favorite stamping-ground. Barch shook his head in wonder, giving grudging respect to a brain which so casually encompassed and accepted this appalling bedlam.

The raft halted. Tick gestured with a hand like a monkey-paw. "That's it." They hung over what appeared to be a funnel of concentric terraces, vast as a crater, shining with leaden rings of light. A great black building, diamond-shaped, hung precariously over the gap, the sharp corner reaching to the center. Pillars of green light, like thick neon-tubes, rose from each of the steps into the building.

Barch muttered, "Strange kind of factory."

The diamond-shaped building expanded, the funnel opened out like a target. "Hold it!" cried Barch. "Are you going to land on that roof?"

Tick waved his arm in a kind of lunatic light-hearted reassurance. "That's where the fulls come out; you want a full, don't you?"

"I want to see what we're getting into," said Barch. He clutched the hand-rail till his fingers ached. "The fulls come out? What does that mean?"

Tick patiently explained. "The in-barges drop into the pit, ride the slide-way; more than likely they bring a cargo of components which discharges into the storage bays. Then the barge climbs around inside the rings and the air-makers fall like plums into the hold. When the barge comes out at the top it is loaded tight . . . See! There it comes now!" Tick pointed triumphantly to a barge poking out an aperture of the diamond-shaped building, like a beetle testing the air.

"That's what we want," said Barch. "Drop down and be ready to land on the cargo as soon as it's safe."

"Safe?" Tick suddenly thought of his loss. "Nothing is safe, surety has fled; death rides one's shoulders like a brain-sucker." He turned to Barch. "Did you know that without the beach-diagram, a man may not even die properly?"

"Watch that barge," said Barch unfeelingly. "It's coming out."

THE barge slid up into the air, round black bosses making a polka-dot pattern in the hold. "Hell and damnation!" said Barch. "Do they ship an army corps to guard the things?"

Kerbol squinted. "A dozen Lenape, six Bornghalese guards—worse than the Podruods."

Tick slanted down. "Tell me when to land."

Barch yelled, "Pull up, you idiot! We can't kill all those men!"

Tick turned the raft off to the side in injured silence. After a moment Barch said, "We'll have to wait for the next one . . . How long should that be?"

Tick waved his arm. "I have no knowledge. When I went up through the slide-ways on my barge, it took one hour, perhaps two. But we had better go back to the mountains; the project is impractical. Without my charm, I feel death close at my side."

"We don't go back till we get one or two of those sustenators. We can't breathe five years on a barge-load of air."

"But you do not attack," complained Tick. "The barge comes out, you draw back, you hesitate. Better to go back to Palkwarkz Ztvo and sleep."

"The next barge may have no guards on it."

"All sustenator barges carry guards. They watch the Lenape, who have grown and modulated the sustenators, and who go to fit them into the space-frame."

"Oh," said Barch.

Tick pointed. "Now here comes a barge to be loaded." He looked quickly at the locator. "Rust-orange—out of Mempas Six, a Bornghaleze District. See, he brings crates of diaphragms and catalyzing filters."

Barch said, "Quick, board that barge."

"But we need no diaphragms, no filters. They are useless."

"By the time the barge comes back out, it'll be loaded with what we want. Sustenators and Lenape brains. Quick! Slide in close, where the pilot can't see." He looked over his shoulder. Rafts, barges, cars, ribbons of white energy, and above, the unbelievable silhouette of Magarak. A million men within half a mile, but no one would see.

Tick skidded the craft sidewise through the air; a trick Barch had never known the raft capable. It flipped over the rail, settled to the floor of the hold.

Barch jumped off, onto the solidity of the barge. "Come along, Tick. Kerbol, slide the raft up under the forward apron."

Barch ran lightly forward, slid open the dome. The pilot was a graceful maroon creature, handsome as a hero's mask, but when he turned to look, Barch saw the four-point star in his eyes—Bornghalese. No occasion for delicacy. Barch shot, pushed Tick into the pilot's seat. "Take over. Fly the barge down to the slide-way, then stay put in the dome. *Don't come out, don't say anything!* When you get a full load, start out for Gdoa."

Tick nodded, reached down, detached the dead man's assignment card, fixed it to himself. The diamond-shaped building loomed close alongside, the great black wall coated with matt enamel, soft black as velvet.

Barch seized the dead Bornghalese, hesitated. If he dragged the body back into the hold, he might be seen from the black diamond-building.

"Kick him out," said Tick off-handedly. "Let him fall."

Why not? thought Barch. He opened the front portal, shoved, rolled; the maroon body flapped down through the shadows like a demon-bird.

Barch turned to give last instructions

to Tick, thought better of it. No need to instruct Tick in brass: that was carrying coals to Newcastle. He hastened back into the hold. The forward catwalk created a dark shelter, Kerbol had slid the raft below, raised it to press up against the overhead.

The ringed terraces of the great funnel surrounded them; oyster-light from the dim sky reflected back and forth, back and forth; there were no shadows, a cool watery peace. Overhead the diamond-building took a harsh black cut out of the sky.

Barch looked around the hold for a hiding place, and perforce came back to the apron under the forward catwalk. Where was Kerbol? Barch crouched in sudden cat-like caution, slunk forward, gun in hand.

"Up here," rumbled a hoarse voice.

Barch ducked, looked up into the cross-bracing under the cat-walk. "Oh." He swung himself up alongside, peered out through the lattice of metal lath. "I hope this turns out to be a good idea."

THE converging terraces hemmed them close, each fifty feet tall, eighty feet wide, with narrow prismatic panes running up the height of the wall.

The barge grounded on a yielding floor; there was cessation to the near-soundless hum of the motors. The barge gave a lurch, slid into a dark hole. Watching anxiously through the lattice, Barch saw the high narrow panes against the sky. His eyes became accustomed to the blurred gray light, but he could find nothing familiar in the lights and shadows, the twisted tubes, slantwise planes and curved surfaces opposite the window.

He heard voices. Four small gray men wearing dirty white trunks and clob-boots leapt down into the hold. From above dropped a tangle of black tubes. The gray men separated the tubes, touched each to a crate. The tubes coiled back on themselves, whisking away the crates. The little gray men followed. Half the cargo remained.

The barge floated along the slide-way. Lurid lights glowed on Barch's face; he turned his head, saw Kerbol huddled tightly in the corner as if impersonating a shadow.

A tall man yellow as a lemon, thin as a heron, wearing a conical green hat, stepped down into the barge, stalked thoughtfully back and forth, his eyes on the deck as if seeking a lost object. He bent, made a mark, stepped out with one stride of spidery leg.

The raft slid on. At one side gleamed the high prismatic panes, from the other came a soft hum with forms and shapes moving, twitching, jerking, contracting.

A musical horn blast sounded; a second spidery man stepped into the hold, walked peering back and forth. He bent over the first man's mark, straightened, looked up. A tremendous black shape dropped with frightening suddenness, buffeting the air three feet from Barch's face, cutting off his view.

A moment passed. The great black shape snapped away like the flick of an eyelid, and now the hold was clear except for litter.

The barge slid placidly, as if floating in a quiet canal. Voices receded into the distance.

New voices sounded; staccato, nasal speech, pitched in different tones. Barch perked up his ears; where had he heard such voices before? He craned his neck, glimpsed three figures bent over small carts. They had lank black hair, oil-black eyes, ivory-yellow skin, button noses. Barch's heart thumped: they looked like Chinese, they talked like Chinese . . . The raft slid on. The voices faded.

Peering through the cracks, Barch saw a low portal ahead. The barge passed through into darkness.

A tremendous hand seized Barch, banged him against the metal. A roar like a million whirlwinds rang in his ears. He seized the bracing, gripped for dear life against the pressure.

The barge slid into light. Barch unfolded his bruised body.

The hold was clean; the litter was gone to the last splinter. Barch looked across to Kerbol. "Are you still there?"

Kerbol grunted. Barch fitted himself gingerly back against the angle struts, which now seemed cunningly designed to press into his aches.

Two men with long pony-faces, mottled white and brown skins, wearing hats like mushrooms, hopped down into the hold, waited. They looked up, reached. A black case hanging on a tube, like a berry on a stalk, dropped into the hold. The piebald men shoved it into a corner; the stalk snapped away.

A minute passed, the raft drifted past a bank of blue, red and green lights. Then another sustenator dropped into the hold. Another rank of lights, another sustenator.

The struts ground into Barch's flesh, he shifted and twisted. Kerbol sat like a lump of putty, motionless. The hold gradually filled, the loaders backing stolidly toward the forward apron.

After an interminable period, the hold was full, except for a last row. The loaders to the cat-walk, guided down the last eight sustenators from above, then jumped to the dock.

The barge slid on, around and up. Sudden vast bright space surrounded the barge. They had come out into a hall. The diamond-shaped building? Barch craned his neck, could see nothing but a high glowing ceiling.

He heard voices of a peculiar brazen timber that his skin recognized with instant contraction: Podruods. He saw massive red legs stalking around the cat-walk; he thought he heard Tick's light rhythmical intonations. A moment later the deck sounded to the thud of new feet. Barch glimpsed a round yellow-brown face. Greenish-yellow splotches like grease paint surrounded eyes like balls of opal.

One after another, perhaps a dozen, they jumped on rubbery legs into spaces between the sustenators, stood silent as bisque dolls.

Two Podruods went one to each of the rear corners, planted themselves like a pair of statues. The little round men looked up with the blank eyes of sheep.

Barch inspected them critically. Who were these? What would he do with them? They looked completely inept, useless—a burden to the tribe. He wanted brains; Lenape mechanics, technicians; what he got was little fat men.

XIX

GRAY daylight poured past the cat-walk into the hold. Barch heard the hiss of rain. A moment passed. Then the barge rose, headed out into the rain. The little round men slid behind the sustenators. The Podruods spat and blew.

Looking up into the stormy sky, Barch glimpsed the black shuttle of traffic. The struts pressed hard into his aching bones as the raft slid up on a slant. Barch eased his gun into position; he saw Kerbol follow suit.

They were flying in the stream of traffic. Barch could see nameless faces, pale splotches, peering blankly out into the rain. He should have instructed Tick to steer free of the lanes.

The barge slid along at a steady pace. A hull hung a hundred feet above, slightly ahead and to the side. Barch could see the propulsion mechanism, glass and metal viscera, intricate, vulnerable. He looked over his shoulder as if to convey his thoughts through the hull to Tick: go higher, go to the side, get clear.

The barge continued steadily. With a maddening sense of momentum and direction, Barch realized that Tick would obey him literally, fly to Gdoa. Rain slanted across the barge like strings of gray wool. Barch could see water trickling down the red skin of the Podruods. The spikes of black hair drooped, fell like sea-weed over the bull-shoulders.

The raft above slid sharply away. Barch squinted up into the sodden sky. So far as he could see—clear. He pushed the gun into the hold. "Wait!" muttered Kerbol.

A crystal-domed raft came darting overhead, hesitated like a hummingbird at a flower. Barch saw the maroon of Bornghalese skin. He glanced anxiously back to the Podruods; Kerbol's voice had sounded loud on his ears—but no, the hissing rain would drown out sound. The Bornghalese raft darted away.

Barch levelled the gun, glanced at Kerbol. Kerbol nodded. Barch pressed the trigger button. The Podruods dropped, one toppled over the side. Barch slipped down into the hold, stood bent nearly double from cramp and bone-ache. He hobbled out into the rain, looked up.

A Podruod loomed over him like a tower, but his gaze was toward the stern. Attracted by Barch's movement he looked down, opened his cavernous mouth. Barch fired. The body toppled at him like a falling statue. Barch ducked back, the body crumpled on the deck.

Barch swung to observe the little round men. They stood like a row of pumpkins, little round eyes staring.

Barch climbed cautiously up on the cat-walk. Kerbol was there already. He ran astern, took the Podruod serpent lashes. He peered over the side; the gigantic welter of Magarak pulsed, whirled, shuttled, gleamed. Barch decided against dumping the corpses. Somewhere was the coordinator, the Magarak Brain, fitting incoming data into patterns. If a piece was too big or too small or odd-shaped, it went to a special file. And presently a pattern might be made with the odd-shaped pieces. He slid the corpses into the hold, ran forward to the pilot dome. Tick was singing to himself in a peculiar falsetto whine, and at first paid Barch no heed.

Barch rapped the back of the narrow head. "Wake up."

Tick gave him a sad glance.

Barch went to the locator, reached under, snapped the chain as he had seen Tick do. "Now, how do you turn off the pointer light?"

"Push back the slide, break the bulb."

Barch did so. "Take us up into the clouds and head for home."

He went back aft, stood looking critically into the hold. The little fat men eyed him nervously. Barch growled under his breath. What to do with them? There was nothing he could do, except take them back to the cave.

He jumped down into the hold. "My name is Barch."

They looked at him solemnly. Barch said brusquely, "You're free men now; you're slaves no longer."

The little man closest to him asked anxiously, "How is this possible?"

"You have heard of the Palamkum?"

"The mountain where the wild men hide."

"That's where you're going now."

The little fat man shuffled nervously. "But why have you gone to such lengths for our benefit?"

"I haven't. I wanted a few of those sustenators. The only way I could get them was to steal the cargo. You happened to be aboard."

The entire group muttered together.

"Why do you want a sustenator?"

"Wait and see," said Barch shortly.

There was further muttering. "And what will become of us?" came the question.

BARCH grinned in spite of his irritation; they were disarmingly like a dozen little pigs, little porkers fearful of the trip to market. "That all depends on whether the Klaf catch us again. Right now you're escaped slaves."

Again they muttered among themselves. One jumped up on the cat-walk, ran to the pilot's dome. Barch followed curiously. The fat man looked in at the locator, glanced at the broken chain, then ignoring Barch ran briskly back to his fellows. Barch watched with puzzlement.

Kerbol muttered, "That's the worst about the Lenape; you can do nothing to their satisfaction."

Barch stared. "Are those Lenape?"

Kerbol grumbled and muttered.

Barch went slowly aft. He had visualized the Lenape as physically equivalent to their reputed mental ability.

In the hold the Lenape were talking heatedly all together; none heeded him. Where Barch before had imagined torpor in the opal eyes, now he thought to see depths of subtle wisdom. They noticed him; all fell silent. "You are Lenape?" asked Barch.

"We are Lenape."

"Then you understand something of how these things work?" Barch indicated the sustenators.

The Lenape seemed surprised, a ripple of expression passed around their faces. "Yes, of course."

"And if this barge broke down, you could fix it?"

There was a stir of amusement. "It depends a great deal on the extent of the damage, on the availability of replacement parts, tools."

Barch nodded. "Fine. Excellent."

They were passing over the sea and the mud-flats; the mountains of the Palamkum rose ahead, vague black objects swaddled and blurred in the mist.

Barch pointed. "That's your future home, until we convert a pair of barges to a space-ship and leave Magarak."

The Lenape listened blankly. The foremost said, "You think to fly space in a barge?"

"In two barges, face to face, welded together."

"Impossible."

Barch felt a sudden sinking of the diaphragm. "Why?"

"The Klau will never allow it."

"The Klau didn't allow me to steal this barge."

"The necessary components and accessories are numerous, hard to acquire."

"Like the sustenators? Like the two barges? Like the technical help? Like a secure place to work?"

"Exactly."

"All those we've got."

There was a moment's silence. Barch was the focus of a dozen curious stares. Then the first Lenape said, "A space voyage would be interminably long. The barges are insufficiently powered to generate second-order acceleration; you would float clumsily through first-order space, the deck pushing at your feet."

"Five years in space is no worse than five years on Magarak. At the end of five years we're home. And maybe you can work out some system to give us more speed."

The Lenape muttered nervously. "A grand concept. Is it practicable?"

Barch said angrily, "You don't act like you want to get home."

"No, no—Lenau is life to us!"

"A few months ago a dozen Lenape escaped Magarak."

"A simple affair for them; they merely bred a secret blister into the rind of the space-ship; that was all there was to it . . . None of this painful fitting and piecing and improvising."

"Any fool can shoot fish in a barrel." And Barch said in a disgusted voice, "Are you with me or not?"

The little round men muttered anxiously together, all speaking at once. Barch failed to understand how communication of any sort was possible. The foremost turned up his face. "We will work with you; there is no alternative."

Barch nodded in grim jocularity. "I thought you'd come around . . . Pass up those corpses; I'll drop them over the side now."

XX

THE next day Barch carried the locator back to the table in the hall, checked Palkwarkz Ztvo to assure himself that the two barges in Big Hole showed no tattle-tale sparks.

Four women came into the hall carrying baskets of gray truffles. One of them was Komeitk Lelianr. Barch studied her covertly. It came to him with a little shock of surprise that she had changed. This was no longer the Komeitk Lelianr he had seen stepping down to Markel's

blue-glass terrace. Her youth, her pleasant girlish assurance had gone. He could not remember the last time he had seen her smile. She had lost weight, her cheeks were thinner, the sheen of her skin had dulled to a subdued old-gold texture.

She turned her head. For two or three seconds their glances held, and Barch felt a weighing, a calculation; her eyes seemed to see him for the first time as an individual.

"Ellen," said Barch, "I want to talk to you."

She came over to the bench. "Yes?"

"Sit down—over here, beside me."

She came around the bench, seated herself.

"Yesterday," said Barch, "I saw some Earth people—Chinese—among the slaves."

She looked at him thoughtfully. "Are you sure?"

"They looked like Chinese, they spoke like Chinese, they acted like Chinese."

Komeitk Lelianr chewed her lip. "It's certainly possible that the Klau are shipping in Earther slaves."

Barch gazed numbly at the fire. "That would mean the Klau have occupied Earth—killed people, destroyed cities."

She shrugged. "That is the usual pattern when they meet resistance."

"They met resistance all right."

She looked at him with her speculative expression. "Yes, knowing you I can believe it."

Barch suddenly realized that returning to the Earth of his memory was a hopeless dream. "And the Lekthwans? What of them?"

"Lekthwa and Klau have been enemies for thousands of years."

"But the Lekthwans won't help the Earthers get rid of the Klau?"

"Not by sending warships, if that's what you mean. We don't have the industrial resources. We have no Magaraks; no Purloppats; no Brengastels—"

"What are those last two?"

"Industrial worlds like this one, on the other side of the Klau rule."

Barch drummed the table-top. "I suppose there's no use borrowing trouble."

The head Lenape, whose name Barch had been unable to pronounce and had so called "Porridge", came into the hall carrying a sheet of parchment. He marched across the room, lay the sheet triumphantly before Barch. "This," he said, "represents the needs incident to any such project as you envision."

Barch stared at the meaningless symbols. Is each one of these marks something you need?"

Porridge bounced up and down jubilantly. "Yes, if you remember, I was of the opinion yesterday that the project was unrealistic."

Barch said, "Let me have your pencil, whatever it was you wrote with." Porridge handed him a flexible fiber. "Now," said Barch, "what is this?" He pointed.

Porridge brushed the first division with his finger. "Lavatory equipment, with spares. Shielded running lights, automatic pilot, and star-finder, communication equipment—"

Barch sat listening in annoyance. Porridge continued reading in a voice full of gusto. "—This item is the pressure compensator."

Barch found it hard to speak. "Porridge," he said finally, "imagine us in space with nothing in the barge but the sustenator, which produces our food and water."

"Disagreeable," said Porridge.

"Would we survive?"

"The question of survival is not the point under discussion."

"Wrong. That's what I'm talking about. Every time I go out stealing things, I may or may not survive. And with me dead there's nobody else here with enough brains to get us off Magarak. So—" Barch scratched a cross through the first division "—out. Unnecessary. What is this?"

In a subdued voice Porridge said, "These are tools. Some I cannot translate, since they are very specialized. This is a hoist. This is a wire-splicer. These are various kinds of hammers, gauges,

rotary buffers. All are quite necessary."

BARCH sat back angrily. "What's wrong with you, Porridge? Do you think you're in a warehouse? We're out in the mountains. I thought you Lenape were intelligent people. Why don't you ask for cushioned work-benches, automatic power-drills?"

"We did," said Porridge. "Right there."

Barch snorted. "You're worse than the Lekthwans—you've got yourselves in a mental rut; you can't think anything but what someone's thought for the last million years. Haven't you ever heard of the word *improvise?*"

Porridge screwed up his face.

"Buffer—what do you want a buffer for? Forget it! Hammers? Use a rock. Hoist? Run a sling under that little Klau raft." Barch crumpled the parchment in disgust. "I'll tell you what you're going to get: welding equipment, deck-plates, and fuel for the engines. We'll probably have another barge or two before we're done; you can strip it of any spare parts you need."

Porridge sat down heavily, kneaded his forehead. "You have a peculiar concept of comfortable space travel."

"I'm not interested in comfort; I want to get home."

Komeitk Lelianr said in a colorless voice, "Barch is from the planet Earth."

"Earth?"

"Out in Efrstl Region." Komeitk Lelianr looked at Barch dispassionately. "His people are socially disorganized, technically limited, ruled by emotion. But any kind of challenge seems to arouse in them a feverish energy. Barch thinks of it as *dynamism.* It is a necessity for action, no matter whether or not toward impossible ends. Rationality is a curiously ineffective argument against him; you are forced to think in his terms."

"Ah," said Porridge, and looked at Barch with new interest.

Barch smiled faintly. He said to Komeitk Lelianr, "You are still convinced that my ideas are impossible?"

Komeitk Lelianr stared into the fire. "No."

Barch relaxed. A significant victory. A great victory. He knew it, she knew it. "Now Porridge, I want you to be reasonable. I want you to exercise your brain. Be ingenious, clever. Tonight we're going out for welding equipment. If we see any tools we'll bring them along. Perhaps you'd like to come out with me?"

"No, no, "said Porridge.

"You go back, start installing the sustenators, as many as the group of us will need. Also bring one or two down here, set it running; then we won't need to leave the cave for food, and we'll be safe from Klau hunters."

Porridge departed. Barch looked after him. He said to Komeitk Lelianr, "Whenever they get together they all talk at once. How do they understand each other?"

The spirit which for a moment had made Komeitk Lelianr's face bright and alive had gone. She said in the emotionless voice Barch had become accustomed to, "They speak and listen at the same time."

"All twelve? Twelve at once?"

"Yes."

"Mmph," said Barch, "that's remarkable."

She looked at him with a sidelong expression Barch as usual could not fathom. "A moment ago you compared the Lenape intellect unfavorably with the Lekthwan."

Barch looked at her in surprise. She spoke as if she were piqued. "I was admiring the Lenape technique, not their originality. I once saw a dog walk a tightrope holding an umbrella between his teeth. I also thought that was remarkable."

Komeitk Lelianr made no comment. Barch continued thoughtfully. "I can't understand how even a dozen of them managed to escape."

"It was a different situation. You judge them from the perspective of your

own culture, your own experience—a narrow viewpoint. A fish cannot swim on dry land. This environment—here in the mountains—is one which gives your abilities full scope. In other situations you might not perform as well. The twelve Lenape who escaped fed extremely subtle mathematics into the breeding tanks. They performed well; they manipulated ideas and mechanisms they understood. The Lenape here are not in that position."

Barch digested the idea, and decided to discontinue the argument. "Perhaps you're right. Now to work. Where do we find welding material? And deckplates?"

Komeitk Lelianr turned to the locator. "Sooner or later you will be captured and killed."

"That's undoubtedly true. Every time I go out my chances are about two in three, which is not too bad. Sooner or later I'll run into the third chance . . . Of course we have advantages; there's such a tremendous flow of traffic that it can't all be guarded."

"But the Brain knows."

"Yes," said Barch, "the Brain." He looked at the locator. "Possibly the Brain is indexed there?"

"Possibly."

"Do you think you could possibly find it?"

She shrugged. "I'll try." Tick came diffidently into the room. "Tick," called Barch, "come over here."

Tick sidled up to the bench without much enthusiasm.

Barch looked into his long sallow face. "What's the trouble?"

"I feel the pressure of my time. I sense the odor of death. If I once more owned the charm of my destiny, I would be secure when all else dissolves in fire and ruin."

Barch said thoughtfully, "From one point of view—yes. But the charm is surely as effective in my possession as it is in yours. Now sit down, and tell me the best place to steal welding supplies."

XXI

RAIN fell into Palkwarkz Ztvo, curtains and streamers gray as mourning crepe, hiding the twilight. The black mountain-side blurred and melted like dark sugar; black fronds pounded and dripped.

Barch, Tick and Kerbol had gone off in the raft an hour since. Lenape grouped at the far table, muttering excitedly, tapping the table with fluttery little fingers, from time to time referring to calculations on a sheet of parchment. Lkandeli Szet, the sad-eyed musician in the embroidered black and green smock, sat drawing plangent vibrations from his string-box; beside him squatted the Calbyssinians blowing windy organ notes through their fingers; Chevrr, the hatchet-faced Splang, crouched as near to the fire as possible, mending a tear in his leggings; the light made moving pools of black along his deep marked face. Flatface lay nude on the bench while his women massaged his back; over his head a listless dice game was in progress. Only Pedratz displayed excitement, and this because he read omens in the fall of the dice.

Komeitk Lelianr came quietly into the hall. She crossed to the entrance, wound through the S-shaped crevice, stood looking out into the rain. Darkness was absolute; there was nothing visible but the hissing vibration.

A step at her back: hard hands gripped her, forced her to the sand. This would be Moranko, who the last two days had been importunate. She relaxed, thinking it was easier to submit than to resist; then a sudden new idea intruded, and she curled into a ball, twisting away from the hot hands. She crawled down the passage with Moranko clutching at her ankles. A corner of rock scraped her side; sighing with pain she staggered to her feet, rounded the corner into the hall.

She went to sit on the bench beside the Lenape who paid her no heed. A moment later Moranko entered the hall,

crossed the room and sat beside her. He bent, whispered in her ear.

"No," said Komeitk Lelianr.

He rose to his feet, petulantly struck her across the cheek. The Lenape turned their heads, inspected her owlishly, moved a little down the bench.

Komeitk Lelianr sat staring at the fire conscius of the pain on her cheek, the ache in her side, the new strange sensation inside her. There was sound at the entrance, she looked up. Roy could not have returned so soon.

She looked around the hall. Two big tables, benches, shadowy walls, crackling fire. Lenape arguing, chattering. Moranko's smouldering gaze. The plaintive sounds of Lkandeli Szet and the Calbyssinians. The smell of flesh and cooking and smoke. She closed her eyes. Outside were the dark mountains of Palkwarkz Ztvo and the black skies heavy as an ocean. This was her place until dying-time, unless—she looked up swiftly. The crevice was empty. And now she dared not go outside with Moranko watching like a dog watching meat.

Suppose Roy were killed tonight? Then she might despair indeed—even though she had never permitted herself hope. But Roy Barch worked, Roy Barch effectuated, Roy Barch brought the possibility of escape within mental grasp. With Roy Barch dead, life became stagnant, squalid, with this cave her life and her death. Her eyes grew moist; it came before her mind, suddenly large, that only the optimism of Roy Barch made Palkwarkz Ztvo bearable . . . A curious race, the Earthers. Young, only a few years removed from savagery, contaminated by the past, correspondingly exuberant and direct.

She considered Barch's word *dynamic.* Odd that he should feel the essential characteristic of his culture so clearly. She wondered briefly about Earth: had the Klau infested it wholly as they had half a dozen other worlds? Or did they merely maintain "absorption centers"—depots for slave traffic? And what of Lekthwa? The longing grew too great, hope she could not allow herself; it would be self-torture even to encourage Roy. Hard on Roy, she thought. Roy gave the effort, the force; he was thanked by none. Barch, in the mind of the tribe, had become equivalent to hard work, when sitting beside the fire was easier, more pleasant.

An hour passed, during which the Lenape rose in a body, trooped into Clet's old chamber and carefully laid themselves down to sleep.

ANOTHER hour went. The fire flickered and lapsed to coals. Moranko still sat eyeing her darkly from the corner. He would wait till the hall was empty, then come for her. She looked around the hall. Flatface? Moses, the dwarf? Sl? Musky Pedratz? Whoever protected her acquired physical rights, by virtue of primeval law. Moranko was less repugnant than any to whom she could appeal, except possibly Roy Barch. It might be less taxing in the long run to submit once more to Roy Barch.

Flatface awoke from his doze on the bench, grunted, scratched himself, staggered off to his bed. Lkandeli Szet had disappeared. Armian and Ardl lay languidly twining each others hair, while Arn blew soft chords through his fingers.

The coals grew dimmer, one of the lamps flickered out. Moranko slid to the bench beside her. "Come with me now or I will beat you."

Komeitk Lelianr listlessly arose from the bench. Moranko took her wrist, started to lead her from the hall.

Footsteps scraped and thudded in the entrance: Barch stood swaying in the entrance. Tick pushed past him, crouched by the fire. Barch's eyes swept the cave. "Where is everybody? His voice was hoarse.

Komeitk Lelianr said, "They've gone to bed."

"Bed!" Barch's voice cracked with emotion. "They go to bed while . . ." He stopped.

"Roy," said Komeitk Lelianr, "what's

wrong with your arm?" Barch was clutching the region of his left side in a peculiar manner.

He came forward, sank down on a bench, said breathlessly to Moranko, "Wake up the tribe. There's a barge outside. We've got to bury it into Big Hole."

"Roy," said Komeitk Lelianr, "your arm . . ." She felt suddenly weak in the knees.

"My arm and Kerbol," said Barch, "both back on the mud-flats. She saw he was crying, tears of grief and exhaustion. Carefully she pulled the bloody rags away from the stump, and went a little dizzy. Faces peered over her shoulder, dull masks with eyes and nostrils wide, aroused to morbid excitement.

Barch said weakly, "Don't stand here; get to work. Chevrr! Where's Chevrr?"

"Here." The hatchet-faced Splang came out of the shadows.

"You know what to do . . . Open up the wall, slide the barge in, close it up again. Take over for me; I'm all in."

The hall was empty, except for Barch and Komeitk Lelianr. Barch lay on the bench, talking at random. "We've got it all—all in this load. Tools, welding tape, welder, deck sheeting . . . There were Bornghalese on the dam. We waited to throw in lights, portable lights. They came running."

"Lie still, Roy. Lie quiet."

"My left hand hurts—in the palm—and I don't have a left hand. It's mixed up in the mud with Kerbol . . . Oh, what a sight . . ."

Komeitk Lelianr tried to remember Lekthwan medicine, but the oddments and theories had no immediate bearing on a stump of an arm.

Pfluga, Flatface's second woman, too fat for work, came wheezing in to build up the fire. She peered at the arm. "And what will you do?" she asked Komeitk Lelianr.

"I don't know."

Pfluga snorted. "There's only the one way." She thrust a heavy poker into the coals.

Barch fainted, and when the smell of burning flesh reached her nostrils Komeitk Lelianr likewise fainted.

Pfluga snorted, sniffed, stirred the fire up under a pot of hot water. There would be calls for food and hot tea before the night was over.

THE Lenape were dissatisfied; the tools were inefficient. Setting out across space in a pair of barges was like putting to sea on a log raft. Crude, intolerably clumsy and slow.

Barch lay back with his eyes shut, ignoring the patter of words. He heard Komeitk Lelianr hesitantly say, "The voyage is not impossible?"

"No, no, of course not. Impossible is the wrong word. Inadvisable, uncouth, indelicate. No bathing, no—" here the Lenape used a string of words Barch could not understand. He lay quietly listening.

Komeitk Lelianr said, "When you return once more to Lenau, these functions will again be applicable."

"True," said the Lenape. "But a year, two years locked in the barge with thirty ruffians?"

"Is it any more unbearable than living here in the cave?"

There was a flurry of words, the Lenape finally deciding that the space-voyage represented no greater hardships than continued life in Palkwarkz Ztvo, and so returned to Big Hole.

Barch opened his eyes, reached out to pull himself to a sitting position, fumbled ineffectually with the air. He realized that he no longer had a left arm, propped himself awkwardly with his right. He looked at his bandage. Clean gray cloth. The stump ached, not unbearably.

Komeitk Lelianr knelt beside him with a bowl of gruel. "How do you feel?"

"As well as could be expected . . . What's been happening?"

"You've been sleeping for two days."

"And what's been happening?"

"Three sustenators are welded in place. Today the decking is being put

down. Tomorrow—well—"

"Two days." Barch rubbed his chin. "Two days . . . Help me up."

"You'd better sit still."

"I've got to think."

"Can't you think where you are?"

"The Bornghalese saw us up along the dam. They know a barge is stolen, they know what's aboard. When the Brain finds out . . . ."

A sensation like a cold draught played along Komeitk Lelianr's skin. She glanced uneasily toward the crevice.

Barch asked feverishly, "Have you checked the locator index for the Brain?"

"It's not listed as the Brain," said Komeitk Lelianr uncertainly.

"I can't understand why they wait so long," fretted Barch. "It's unnatural."

Komeitk Lelianr said soothingly, "Another few days and we should be ready to leave."

"We need fuel—*accr*, Tick calls it."

"But—you can't go out stealing again."

"I'll have to. Who else will go?"

Komeitk Lelianr had no answer. After a while she said, "We'll also need raw materials for the sustenators."

"Raw materials?"

"Carbon-stuffs. The cycle inside the barge is subject to waste. The sustenators take carbon from the air and build food, but the carbon of excretory matter is ejected from the ship, lost. We need material to replace the drain."

Barch closed his eyes wearily. "There won't be a drain."

Komeitk Lelianr eyed him anxiously. "How is that possible?"

"Sewage is carbon, oxygen, hydrogen," said Barch. "Molecules don't get dirty."

"The concept is revolting."

"You'll get used to it. Qualms in Palkwarkz Ztvo are a luxury."

"And I suppose if someone dies, his body goes into the sustenator?"

Barch grinned. "In deference to your sensibilities, all corpses get a sea-burial. But if the Klau come first we'll all be corpses." He struggled to his feet. "I don't know why I should be so weak."

Komeitk Lelianr took his elbow, steadied him. "You've lost a lot of blood."

Barch winced, closed his eyes as if to shut out a terrible vision. He muttered, "That rascal Tick, hiding, dodging, slinking . . . If he had stayed where I put him—" he wiped at his forehead. "Well it's in the past; Kerbol's gone, the best man in the valley." Barch turned his glowing eyes full into hers. "He was loyal. Kerbol stood by his guns, even when he died for it."

XXII

SHE abruptly dropped his arm. Barch turned away, boiling inside with a hundred feverish rages and griefs. He made his way slowly up to Big Hole, where he leaned back against the wall, legs like wet rags. With gloomy satisfaction he listened to the sounds of activity. Barges 1 and 2 sat side by side on the flat, with the four floodlights that had cost so much blood hanging overhead. Barge 3 rested askew down at the far end, with the boxes, crates and miscellaneity of three cargoes in between.

Barch calculated up into the regions above. Stalactites glittered and twinkled; the ceiling was gloomy, complex, Gothic—but there seemed to be enough room, when the time came, to invert Barge 2 over Barge 1. A delicate maneuver, but Tick had a completely sure touch . . . As if Tick were telepathic, he looked up from where he squatted beside Pedratz, the welder, who was cutting pipe into stanchion lengths. He came bounding over the rocks like a cat. "Well?" asked Barch.

"When will you give me my charm?"

"You'll get it as soon as we're out in space."

Tick tugged desperately at his braided side-burn. "Too late, too late." His voice rose to a neighing. "I feel the bulk of terror, my brain aches, my knees are weak at wading through imagined blood."

Barch said in a cracked voice, "You'll ache all over if you don't stop that croaking. I've got your charm in my pocket; as long as I'm safe, it's safe. Think that over. Now go tell Porridge I want to talk to him."

Tick went crouch-backed across the stone floor; a moment later Porridge's round head pushed cautiously over the edge of Barge No. 1. The opal eyes fixed on Barch a ruminative ten seconds, then he climbed up to the cat-walk, backed down the ladder, trotted across the cave. "What do you want?"

"I want to talk with you about defending ourselves."

"I know nothing about fighting. The Podruods are the great fighters. He started to turn away.

"Just a moment," said Barch, grinning sourly. "We don't have any Podruods handy at the moment."

"True."

"From what you know of the Klau mind, how do you suppose they'll attack us?"

"I would assume that armored Podruod troops would be sent to kill us."

"And suppose that failed?"

Porridge's eyes bulged thoughtfully. "They might send a monitor with torpedoes to break open the mountain. Or they might establish a cone of lethal radiation against the cave opening and then we would be trapped like mice in a shoe."

"Come inside a minute," said Barch. "To send in troops, they have these alternatives. They can land a barge-load outside the valley, march them in, the same way the Klau come hunting. They can land a barge-load on this flat, in front of the cave. Or they can land them somewhere else in the valley which is unlikely, because there are no other flat landing-places within convenient distance."

Porridge looked uninterestedly along the damp black mountain-side, then pointed across the valley. "A barge might land on the knoll of that bluff."

"Then the Podruods would have to climb down the steep slope and across those sharp rocks. However," said Barch, "that bluff would make a fine place to command the mouth of the cave. So that makes three areas we want to guard: the valley mouth, that bluff, and the flat here in front of the cave."

Porridge fidgeted. "Yes, yes. On Lenau we would convert the ground to a gel with vibrators."

"This happens to be the Palkwarkz Ztvo," said Barch. "I'm going to fly a load of explosive over to that bluff and bury a few mines. Can you build me a long-range detonator?"

"First, I must see the explosive."

"Let's go back to Big Hole," said Barch. He gave a last look up and down the valley. "A gray day; notice how high and thin the clouds are?" On a day like this he and Komeitk Lelianr had first dropped into the great sighing valley; on a day like this he had killed the Klau and liquidated Clet. "Klau come hunting on such days."

They returned to Big Hole, went to the crates taken from Barge No. 1. "Kerbol knew these explosives," said Barch, "I don't."

He pried open a crate, looked down at shiny gray bars lodged on a rack of rust-colored plastic. "This is Super. Very powerful. We've got about sixty crates. Enough to blow up half Magarak."

He found a second box. "This is the stuff Kerbol used—abiloid. And this string is the fuse, or detonator."

"Yes, yes," said Porridge. "Quite common."

"Can you work out a remote control?"

Porridge glanced down to the dome of Barge No. 2. "There are instruments which could easily be adapted."

"Good," said Barch. "Suppose you get at it right now."

"Very well."

BARCH watched Porridge march briskly off. He felt eyes upon him—Tick's. When Barch turned head, Tick looked away. Barch watched Pedratz

the welder a moment.

Each length of pipe made one stanchion, with about five feet waste. The sight of the pile of five-foot lengths gave Barch an idea. He crossed the cave, tapped Pedratz's taffy-yellow shoulder. "Pedratz, seal off one end of about four of these." Barch pointed to the pipes.

Pedratz nodded, turned, prodded Tick with his toe. "Hoist four of those lengths into the dolly."

Barch's stump began to ache. He turned, left Big Hole, went down the passage into the hall.

He stopped short. From one of the dark alcoves came the sound of a muffled struggle, panting, gasping, a throaty growling. Barch swiftly crossed the room, hand on his gun. Komeitk Lelianr sat huddled against the wall, face dirty, hair in a tangle.

Moranko rose twistedly to his knees, to his feet. Blood trickled from his nostrils; his eyes showed white rings of passion and anger.

"What's going on?" asked Barch.

"I want this woman," said Moranko sullenly. "She belongs to nobody. Clet took her from you; Clet is dead, you have not taken her back. But she resists me; look, she has kicked my face."

Barch glanced down at Komeitk Lelianr who was combing her hair back from her face. His mind moved sluggishly among a hundred emotions. "The woman is no concern of mine."

Komeitk Lelianr's face never changed; she sat looking at him reflectively.

Barch turned sharply back to Moranko. "However, we are no longer a tribe of savages; we are civilized. If this woman wants to mate with you, good. If not, you must not force her."

Moranko's face went blood-shot. "She belongs to no one."

"She belongs to herself."

"It was not thus with Clet."

"Clet is dead." Barch turned to Komeitk Lelianr, who had gained her feet. "Do you want to mate with this man?"

She smiled faintly. "I have never wanted to mate with anyone."

Moranko turned, strode across the hall.

Barch turned back to Komeitk Lelianr. She opened her mouth as if to say something, hesitated. Barch waited. She said, "I am carrying your child."

Barch heard a droning in his ears. He looked in wonder down at the slight golden figure. A moment passed. He found his voice. "*My* child? How do you know it's my child?"

"Clet was a Podruod, one of the Klau sub-races, a different human species. There is no fertilization between his type and mine."

"Oh." Barch sat down at the table. "This is a new development." He looked at her a long moment. "And what do you expect me to do?"

She said listlessly, "Nothing. You did what I wanted when you sent Moranko away."

"And when this child comes—you will hate it?"

"No. . . It is not a child I wanted. But it is part of me."

Barch's mind raced across time and space. "And when we get back to civilization?"

"That is problematical."

"Yes," said Barch heavily, "and there is a great deal to be done."

He started back up the passage into Big Hole. In the dark something sprang ferociously at him, threw him to the ground. Barch fell on his stump, felt the flesh squash, the blood squirt, lay in a daze. He felt nimble hands at his pouch, a hiss. Then there was a kick at the nape of his neck, a scuffle of footsteps.

Barch lay quietly, doing nothing more than existing. After a moment, with a whirling head, he gained his knees; his thoughts began to assume form again . . . Moranko? A second idea brought him staggering to his feet. Or Tick? He clasped a hand into his pouch. No charm.

Barch ran limp-legged down into the hall. Komeitk Lelianr looked up at him in consternation. "Who came through here?" croaked Barch.

"Tick. . . ."

BARCH ran to the crevice. Tick would make instinctively for the raft. If he escaped, if he added his story to what the Magarak Brain already knew . . . Barch pulled out his gun. Tick was at the raft, tugging at the mooring line. He saw Barch, slid off into the forest, sprang into the trees like a monkey. Barch heard his shrill mocking laugh. "Too late, too late, you'll see me nevermore." And there was the rustle of branches, the clatter of black fronds.

Barch went to the raft, sank on it limply. He looked at the stump of his left arm; the gray cloth binding was sticky and dark. The bone ached intolerably.

He swung himself aboard the raft, untied the mooring line. Rising over the tree-tops, he coasted slanting down toward the river, the course Tick would presumably take. Underneath him the black fronds flapped and rasped, glistening like the scales of a great black fish. Tick was no more visible than if he had been an insect.

Barch lowered the raft to tree level, put his head over the side, listened. A soft crashing, not too far away. Barch manipulated the pedals; the raft slid like a shadow over the tree-tops. Barch stopped again. Silence. The sound might have been a wild animal. Directly below him Barch heard the crush of feet. He peered through the fronds, gun ready. But he saw not Tick but a Podruod.

Barch froze. The Podruod, walking as stealthily as his weight and the ground would allow, vanished.

Barch looked swiftly around the sky. Was this the Klau attack he had expected? Down toward the valley came a sharp hoarse cry, a high-pitched babble in a voice Barch recognized as Tick's. A vibrant bugle call. Below him heavy footsteps pounded, the Podruod running toward the sounds. Barch relaxed. A hunt, and Tick was the quarry. Best take the raft back to the cave before the Klau hunter rounded the bluff.

Barch slid the raft into its accustomed spot, sat listening. The Podruod bugle-calls sounded now up at the head of the valley. If Tick gained the wilderness of rocks at the foot of Mount Kebali, he stood a fair chance of escaping. But the trumpeting shifted, sounding ever louder. He's leading them to the cave, thought Barch. He limped painfully across the flat to the opening of the crevice, stood in the shadows.

Over the forest came the long black shape of the Klau raft, the Klau following the chase like a fox-hunter riding to the hounds. The raft came nearer. Barch could see the silhouette of the Klau.

Tick broke out of the forest, ran erratically along the edge of the flat, paused, looked with a passionate eagerness toward the cave. Afraid to come, afraid not to come, thought Barch. Well, give the poor devil a chance. He stepped out. "Hey, Tick." Tick looked up. "Come on."

Tick's face was a mask of indecision. His eyes ran fearfully around the clearing; then overhead came the Klau raft, long and black as a shark. Four Podruods burst out of the forest. Now Tick would have run for the cave but the Podruods cut him off. Barch stood back, silent, his gun ready. The Podruods came at Tick from four directions. Tick stood quiet, and Barch saw his frame grow rigid, his eyes start to pop from their sockets. Look out, Podruods, thought Barch.

Tick ran forward, seemed to run right up the chest of the nearest Podruod. He caught the great red head, set his feet against the chest, performed a peculiar churning motion. The head twisted in three-quarters of a circle; the body fell like a pole. Tick sprang free, raced, dodged, cut in and out. The Podruods lumbered back and forth, finally one caught him by the angle. Tick fell, doubled up like a squirrel, and with awe Barch saw him catch up the great body, cast it aside as if it were a baseball bat.

Now Tick was caught; Podruods fell on him from all sides; masitffs tearing at a badger. Tick was down. The Podru-

ods stepped back, their feet swung up, down, with sodden sounds. Barch turned away.

Behind him he felt the pressure of bodies, heard awed murmurings. "Quiet," whispered Barch. "Go up into Big Hole, tell them to be quiet."

The Podruods at last stepped back, looked up at the raft. The Klau stretched lazily, sat up, stared around the flat. His gaze passed over the shadowed crevice; Barch felt the stab of the four-pronged red eyes. The eyes passed on; the bristling black head swung back to inspect the sky.

Black clouds were scudding across Mount Kebali. A few heavy drops of rain spattered on the leaves. The Podruods called up hoarsely, pointing to the clouds. The Klau ignored them. He waved his hand toward the upper valley. The Podruods shuffled sullenly into the forest.

The dead Podruod and the bloody tatter that had been Tick were left on the flat.

Rain started a tentative tattoo on the black fronds—drops big as marbles. The Klau touched a button and a hood snapped over his head. He moved his foot; the raft slid down over the valley.

Barch turned, pushed back into the hall. "That solves the Tick problem."

XXIII

KOMEITK LELIANR sat at the table, studiously intent at the locator—poring over the index, checking into the viewer. Barch stood by the fire, absent-mindedly watching the firelight send changing colors across her skin. He tore his glance away. Certainly he wanted to own the creature. Certainly she was a beautiful thing, and she carried his child. But all this was beside the point.

Barch, he said to himself, if there's one thing you've learned beyond anything else, it's that her way of thinking and your way don't mix. Perhaps she, in her turn, had learned that superiority and inferiority were subject to the reference. Perhaps he, by proving the point—at least to his own satisfaction—had divested part of her most urgent attraction.

Still, he thought wistfully, she was an unutterably beautiful thing, and he would have given half his soul to possess her completely. Impossible.

Porridge bounded down the passage into the hall, trotted over to the fire, smelt appreciatively of the pot. Then, with a wary glance at Barch, he went to sit opposite Komeitk Lelianr.

After a moment he spoke to her; she looked up, answered briefly. Porridge darted a glance over his shoulder at Barch, spoke at some length. Barch's curiosity could hold out no longer. He crossed the stone floor, seated himself beside Porridge. "How's the job coming?"

"Very well, very well indeed."

"When do you think you'll be ready?"

Porridge considered. "The deck is finished. Tomorrow we fix on the second barge. Next day we build on a double port. Then you can take the affair into space."

"Is the double port necessary? I'd like to get away from here right away."

"It's indispensable in the event of repair to the drive gear and also when refueling becomes necessary."

"Oh." Barch rubbed his chin. After a moment he said, "Tonight I'll go out after the fuel, and—" he paused, glancing from Komeitk Lelianr back to Porridge. "What's the trouble?"

"Nothing, nothing whatever," said Porridge. He turned ostentatiously away. Komeitk Lelianr returned to the locator.

Barch coldly asked her, "Any luck?"

"No. Nothing definite. I have a tentative idea."

The other Lenape came down from Big Hole, sat in a tight circle at the far bench. Porridge arose and joined them; an immediate clatter of voices arose.

Komeitk Lelianr said hesitantly, "Why are you so anxious to locate the Brain?"

Barch looked her over thoughtfully. "You can't guess?"

"No."

"When I find where it is I'll try to destroy it."

Her eyes jerked up, met his. "Roy—don't you think you should rest tonight?"

"Rest? I've got to get the fuel, *accr*, whatever it's called." He stood up, glanced around the room. Eyes flickered away from his, backs were half-turned. Barch sat down. "What's wrong with everyone?"

Komeitk Lelianr's fingers moved nervously along the locator. "They think—you're tired."

"Tired? Of course I'm tired! Why shouldn't I be tired, and everybody else for that matter? We can rest out in space."

Komeitk Lelianr said in a low voice, "They remember that Clet called you *Crazy Man.*"

Barch sat like an iron statue. "So everybody thinks I'm crazy . . . I might have known. I saw Porridge giving me a couple wall-eyed looks."

Komeitk Lelianr said in a worried voice, "He can't understand why you want to steal *accr* when there's enough in the cave to last twenty years."

"Enough to last twenty years!"

"So he says."

Barch slumped, exhaled a great breath. "Where?"

"In Big Hole. In the crates. Kerbol called it Super."

Barch's face twitched; he could not choose between laughing or yelling. He forced himself to be calm. "I never knew the stuff was *accr*. No one ever told me. . . . Do you think I like ducking around through the fog, getting myself shot up?"

"No," said Komeitk Lelianr hurriedly. "No, no . . . But why are you so anxious to destroy the Brain?"

Barch, riding a yeasty wave of mingled anger and elation, said, "Think. By now the Brain surely has enough facts to conclude that fugitive slaves are stealing barge-loads of material."

"I suppose so."

"Any day we can expect to be attacked. If I can plant a bomb under the thing, I'll delay this attack a long time."

Komeitk Lelianr frowned. "I don't think you realize the essential nature of Magarak or its organization."

"You've never said a truer word. I feel like a cat in a stamp-mill every time I take out that raft. Look at it this way. Would the Klau be disturbed if I blew up their Brain?"

"I should think so. It would be a most serious matter."

"What's bad for them is good for us. Call it diversionary tactics. That's simple enough. Isn't it?" He took her silence for assent. "Do you think you can find the Brain?"

"I think I've found it."

"Good. And do you still think I'm crazy?"

Her glance went to his left shoulder. "I'm not well-enough acquainted with the norm of your people to judge."

Barch rose to his feet. He said thickly, "About ten more minutes of double-talk, I actually would be crazy."

HE WENT back to the fire. The hell with them all. Explaining motives was useless; his patterns didn't fit their minds. He put his hand to his gun; here was his explanation. He met Komeitk Lelianr's sudden alarmed stare, grimaced. Now she thinks I'm planning to run amok. Very well. No point in explaining anything. Give orders, see that they're obeyed.

He strode across the room to the Lenape. There was a sudden silence; he felt the eyes of the entire tribe on his back.

"Porridge," he said, "you think I'm crazy. That suits me as long as you work; think anything you like. Tomorrow I want you to load Barge No. 3 with all the abiloid we have left, and a couple cases of *accr*. I want you to rig a detonator on the bow, on each forward corner, to go off on contact. I want you to put a

cut-out switch in the anti-collision mechanism, so I can disengage it whenever I want. Do you understand?"

Porridge blinked. "Clearly."

"Good." Barch walked across the floor to the entrance, slipped out into the night.

The rain had stopped; the air was strangely calm for the Palkwarkz Ztvo. Barch crossed the clearing, wandered to his raft. For a moment he considered climbing aboard, raising up into the dark sky, riding through the night. But there was no guide-light set out, the locator was in the hall, and once up in the air, he would not be able to find his way back.

He lay on the raft, flat on his back. Never had he known the valley so still. Not a breath of air; not a leaf stirring. He listened. Not a sound. An eery night, fit for strange deeds.

Down the slope near the river came a thud. Barch raised half up on the raft, listened. There was no other sound. He lay back once more . . . Two more days, then space—wonderful prospect. And then where? Back to Earth? Perhaps he had kept the idea purposely out of his mind. The Earth he would return to would not be the Earth he had left. He might be taken a second time, sent back to Magarak.

Best not think of it. But if the Klau controlled Earth, how would he return? And how tightly, how stringently would they hold it? Could the Earthers resist? And what of the Lekthwans? If Ellen were a typical example, they would be small aid. A cultured people, subtle, artistic, beautiful—but where were they when it came to guts?

Barch chewed his lip. Maybe he was doing the girl an injustice. For instance, he had never heard her complain or whimper. She did her share of the menial jobs. She had the guts, but only in terms of an unyielding stoic characterization. Had they no characterization called *Indomitable Fighter*, or *Unquenchable Resistance?* He'd have to ask Ellen about that.

He considered the future: their child. Who would take charge, who would educate it? He sighed. Ellen, naturally. Would he be allowed paternal privileges, would he ever see this child of his, would Ellen acknowledge him? Barch sighed again. Best not to bring the matter up.

The lights of a barge appeared over Mount Kebali; Barch followed them across the sky, out of sight over Poriflammes Valley. Barch relaxed. Hardly likely that the Klau would come by night. Sometime they must come; why had they delayed so long? The Brain thought sluggishly—or underestimated the urgency of the situation. Barch ruminated, weighing pros and cons.

If the Klau attacked during the next two days, then he would go out to demolish the Brain. If they were able to leave before the Klau acted—so much the better.

Barch swung his feet to the ground, walked out into the open. The strange lull was coming to an end; thunder rattled through the clouds, Barch heard the stealthy patter of rain.

He returned to the cave. As he slid through the crevice he could hear voices raised in heated conversation. He entered the hall. Silence. Faces were pale disks around the room oriented to him like flowers to the sun.

"Go right ahead," said Barch. "Don't mind me."

XXIV

THE Klau came the next day. During the morning Barch mined the bluff, set out his defenses for the flat, but when he looked up and saw the tremendous barge settling easily toward the flat, his heart sank. His preparations suddenly seemed picayune, trivial.

He watched the barge drifting in. It came with ominous ease and certainty, a black monster twice as large as any Barch had seen before. It blotted out half the sky, dropping toward him like a foot coming down on a beetle. Barch jerked back with the impulse to escape.

Spike-haired heads protruded over every rail like an ornamental fringe, and at the stern, was a hard-angled shape with the look of lethality.

Barch looked toward the cave; saw a pair of frightened faces peering from the crevice. Flatface came out of the forest, cast a terrified glance over his shoulder, hurried across the flat, humping like a buffalo.

Barch called anxiously, "Hey, Flatface, over here—give me some help." Flatface scuttled only the faster for the cave.

Barch looked after him, seething with fury. Very well, I'll do it myself. He ran through the trees to where four long shapes stood leaning in makeshift troughs—the pipes Pedratz had welded to his order.

The barge was only two hundred feet overhead. Barch jockeyed the trough around, sighted up the pipe into the exposed entrails of the barge. He broke the detonator fuse, jumped back.

There was a dry snap, pop, a rush, a roar. The pipe-rocket split like a starfish; venting blue smoke it whistled erratically up, dodging and twisting. Barch thought, it's a miss, I can't aim these things. But the rocket swerved, caught under the stern, exploded. A hole opened instantly, bodies spattered up, curved out, like drops in a fountain, paused, fell.

The barge sagged down at the stern, spilled its cargo, hung swaying by the bow. Into the flat fell a screaming rain, thrashing, twisting shapes.

Aboard the barge a few still clung to the rails, hanging to each other like a chain of ants. Barch drew his gun, aimed, fired—again, again. The barge was clear of men, except the pilot in the dome, clawing at the controls. But to no avail. Swaying gently the barge sank until the stern touched the ground, and there it stood. Barch shot at the pilot, but the splinter whistled off the dome.

Barch hesitated a moment, then cautiously approached the weapon mounted on the stern. With one eye on the pilot he inspected it, tested the movement. It spun on a swivel. It was a strange pattern, H-shaped with a long central bar, like a naval range-finder. The trigger was in an obvious position. The pilot was climbing out of the dome; no time for niceties of sighting. Barch swung the H around, focussed it as closely as possible, pressed home the trigger. There was a crackling sound; the control dome disappeared. The barge fell flat with a great squash and crush of air.

Barch turned to look at the bodies on the flat. A dozen or so squirmed, one or two crawled moaning along the stone. Barch swung the H, the crackling snapped out; a great oval spot on the flat was gouged out, seared, glossy.

Barch inspected the weapon appreciatively. Somewhere there must be a sighting device—here, a tube, and beside it, a lever.

A thousand feet above floated a raft with a crystal top. Barch peered through the sights. Two rafts. He moved the lever, the two merged. He pressed the trigger. The raft became a few flapping, falling pieces. No more targets. Nothing alive. Barch jumped down to the flat. He looked up to the cave mouth, saw nervous motion inside.

HE PICKED his way among the bodies, slid along the crevice to the hall. The Lenape were huddled into an alcove, like puppies in a basket. "Get busy," snapped Barch. "If you can't fight, you can at least work."

He looked around the hall. Pedratz stood by a wall, his face bland and round as the full moon. "Get your equipment, see if you can cut loose that gun."

The Lenape were trooping up the passage to Big Hole, pressing close together, making nervous motions with their hands. "Porridge," said Barch, "have you fixed up Barge No. 3 as I told you?"

"The work of a moment," said Porridge hastily.

"How much more time before we leave Magarak?"

"Difficult to say. The double port is not yet fabricated; the hull welding will be finished before the day is out."

"Well, hurry up with Barge No. 3. If the Klau start to work on us seriously, we won't last very long. I think I can distract them."

"Dangerous, dangerous."

"Not if you fix everything exactly as I tell you to. Incidentally, you're coming with me. I can't pilot that barge."

Porridge sagged like a loose sack of meal. Without speaking he turned, hurried up the passage.

Barch seated himself at the table across from where Komeitk Lelianr worked at the locator.

"Come to anything definite?"

"Yes, I think so. On the index it's called *Central Organ.*"

Barch looked into the viewer, into the jungle of fleshy pastel shapes. The target ring encircled a small green square, surrounded by a blue mass shaped like an ink blot. To one side was a rusty-orange rectangle that seemed to quiver and jump as Barch looked at it; to the other a sprinkle of gray dots. Radiating away from the green square was a series of minute red capillaries, so faint as to be hardly noticeable. "So that's the Brain."

"Nothing else seems likely. I cannot be sure, of course."

"Is it far?"

"It's a third of the way around the planet, in the Central District."

"Central District? More complicated than Quodaras?"

"Quodaras is a newer development, only a few hundred years old."

"Oh. Well, it makes no particular difference."

There was silence for a moment or so. Then, frowning into the viewer, she said, "Roy—do you still think this plan of yours is—feasible?"

Barch made a disgusted sound. "The Klau just lost a bargeload of Podruods. Next time they'll send something heavier. We can't stand up under any serious attack. We've got to get their minds off us long enough to make ourselves scarce. We're walking along a precipice right now. And I've got work to do. I've got to see that there's enough raw material aboard for the sustenators. I've got to get Barge No. 3 loaded with abiloid—and a couple crates of *accr.*"

The day passed for Barch like the day before his execution, each second, each minute stretched far out, the hours paradoxically compressed.

The work moved with exasperating slowness; Barch ducked back and forth into Big Hole, standing fretfully over the Lenape, convinced of their inefficiency but unable to comment because he did not understand what they were doing. He barked at the women who were carrying domestic utensils into the barge, raged at Flatface and the labor crew for spending their time gaping at the field of Podruod corpses instead of carrying aboard the logs of green timber they had cut.

Pedratz successfully cut loose the heavy weapon on the stern of the warbarge. Barch carried it slung under the raft to a niche just inside the cave mouth; from here he could command almost the whole of the valley. Suppose the Klau came while he was off on his final mission? He called to Chevrr, the dour Splang. "Come over here a minute."

Chevrr approached suspiciously. Barch explained the working of the gun to him, made Chevrr focus on several objects near and far to his satisfaction.

"Now you stay up here. You're the guard. If you see the Klau coming, don't shoot, call for me. If I'm not here, use your own discretion."

Chevrr made a sound of acquiescence. Barch strode through the hall, climbed the passage into Big Hole.

PORRIDGE was standing beside Barge No. 3, looking up at the dome lackadaisically. "Porridge!" barked Barch. The Lenape turned his head; the round opal eyes met Barch's hot hazel eyes without expression. "When are you go-

ing to have that barge ready?"

"It's all ready now."

"Oh," said Barch. "The explosive aboard?"

"Everything."

"Two cases of *accr?*"

"Correct. The rest is loaded aboard the space-hull."

"Good. Now you're sure you've done what I wanted?"

"There is a detonator fixed at each corner of the bow, connected to the cargo."

"Good. I'll get the men to open out the cave, then we'll be off."

Porridge made a vague whining sound. "I do not care to go. The journey is unnecessary."

Barch's face muscles twitched. He controlled his temper. "Show me how to operate the barge."

Porridge jumped with great eagerness aboard. "It is very simple. Here is the speed. To go anywhere on the planet, set the target on the locator, throw this switch. This ball controls the barge when the locator-guide is not in operation." He spoke on, touching knobs and bars and finger-guides. Barch asked questions, sat in the seat, made sure he understood.

He climbed back down to the ground. "I'll go get the men to take down the wall; you bring the barge out through the hole."

Barch stood in the flat watching the rocks fall away from the opening. A black aperture appeared. Chevrr yelled down, a hoarse cry, "The Klau!"

The men at the mouth to Big Hole froze; Barch looked up. Slipping down over Mount Kebali came a great black ship.

Hysterical wailing broke out everywhere around the cave—loud sobs of mortal unabashed fear. "Shut up!" yelled Barch. "Get inside the cave!"

Barch took Chevrr's place at the gun, crouching behind the edge of the rock.

The ship cruised easily down the valley, past the flat, then rose over the narrow mouth, circled, came slowly back. The aperture into Big Hole was in shadow, facing away from the valley; it would hardly attract attention.

The ship once more passed before the flat. A great crackling filled the air; the flat jarred, shimmered. The crackling ceased. The wrecked barge, the Podruod corpses were gone. Barch's diaphragm convulsed.

The crackling sounded again. The forest below the flat collapsed. Once more. The rock by Barch's face quivered. Behind, in the cave, the wailing recommenced. Barch growled over his shoulder, "Stop that racket!" He turned back. So far no harm done; they were shooting at random. Only a lucky shot could hurt them. He hoped the Klau commander would come to the same conclusion.

THE ship passed almost overhead; Barch followed it in the gun-sights. Perhaps the hull was proof to this relatively feeble piece; he held his fire.

The Klau commander acted as Barch had hoped. The ship circled down the valley once again, paused over the commanding bluff, settled slowly.

In high excitement Barch ran into the cave. "Porridge! Where's Porridge?"

Komeitk Lelianr sitting at the table, pointed to an alcove. Barch ran over to find the Lenape wound together in a tight sweating ball. "Porridge, get out of there!" He reached in with his good hand, tore the cluster of bodies apart. Porridge's red blinking face appeared. "Come out of there. Hurry!"

Porridge struggled clear.

"Get to that remote-control box. When I give you the word—let go the No. 1. Understand?"

Porridge shuffled to the box on the back table, Barch returned to the crevice.

The ship alighted softly on the bluff; instantly a ramp fell down, a corps of Podruods sprang out. Barch ducked back into the cave. "Now!"

Violet light flashed through the crevice; an instant later the face of the cliff

rang as if with the impact of shrapnel.

Barch cautiously peered out across the valley. The bluff was gouged and splintered; in the valley below were the broken pieces of the warship.

Barch pushed back into the cave. "Porridge, where are you?" He ran across the room, caught the chunky shoulders. "Back to work. We count our time in minutes now." He swung around. "Ellen!"

"Yes?"

"I'm going now."

"Roy—"

"Don't argue with me. If I don't go, we have three or four hours of life ahead of us. They'll take us seriously now, they'll do the job right—unless I get in the first lick."

"But, Roy, the ship must be almost ready. . . ."

"Keep Porridge busy until I get back. It's the only way to give us a few hours grace."

"And if you don't come back?"

"I'll come back. But if I don't—" he paused "—good-by."

"Good-by."

Barch hesitated an instant; suddenly there were a thousand things to tell her. She turned away quickly.

Barch ran up the passage into Big Hole. "Porridge, climb into that barge, back it out, push open a hole."

Porridge wordlessly climbed into the dome. The stern of the barge brushed the wall; it fell open. The barge slid out into the air.

Barch stood a moment looking at the sky. Twilight was falling through the valley. Overhead the sky was mottled, like watered gray silk. The trees stood quiet and still; there was no sound. Barch's voice sounded loud. "Sure you won't come with me, Porridge?"

Porridge shuffled his feet. "I am needed to work."

"Very well. Work hard."

"We will be done soon."

Barch jumped into the little raft, slid it up to the cat-walk behind the control dome. He looked into the hold, saw a satisfactory bulk of boxes. "Enough to do a little damage, eh, Porridge?" he called down jocularly.

Porridge threw up his hands, walked away.

Barch looked around the flat, looked up to the sky. In the cave mouth he saw a slim slight figure. Ellen? He waved. The shape vanished within.

Barch entered the control dome, seated himself in the unfamiliar seat. Gingerly he put into practice Porridge's instructions. The barge rose vertically up. Barch twisted the locator index, looking into the viewer. There—a green square on an irregular blue shape. But before he snapped the switch he manipulated the controls to get the feel of the barge. Up, down, sideways, ahead, turn. Nothing too difficult. Barch snapped the switch on the automatic pilot, pushed home the speed button, sat back.

XXV

THE barge slipped like a shadow over Mount Kebali. Ahead was Quodaras District, a horizon-to-horizon blur of light. Below the stone quarry showed a lonesome cluster of lights; how long ago it seemed that he and Kerbol had slid down to waylay Tick. Tick was dead, Kerbol was dead: fruitless, unsatisfactory, curtailed lives.

The stone quarry vanished astern like a pearl in the fog. Below Barch saw the glimmer of the Tchul Sea, the reflection from the far band of lights glistening on the surface.

The barge suddenly slipped sideways, steadied; Barch realized that now he moved in a traffic stream. Other barges floated past, alongside, over. Incurious faces showed dimly: faces with dead souls.

The barge flew over the glaring lights, the fiery pots, the churning arms, the incalculable shapes of Magarak.

Suddenly it occurred to him, how would he find his way home? There was no locator on the raft. He must remember to unclip it, take it with him.

On the locator he gauged the progress of his voyage. Not yet half-way to Central Organ. Below, the buildings, the shapes, the moving arms, the fantastic fires, took on proportions more enormous than he had yet seen. The air reeked with acrid odors; the clatter and jangle of the processes reached up to astonish him. How could men survive such a nightmare?

And yet men did survive. Men had survived ice-ages, pestilences, wars, and they survived Magarak. Human will to live approached the infinite. And Barch thought, put the Zulu buck—(odd, he had not thought of the Zulu for a long time)—put the Zulu buck at a modern city intersection, and the Zulu might also wonder at man's resistance to self-created hell. Barch wondered idly, suppose you brought the Zulu to Magarak, what then? His imagination rejected the idea.

He sank back into the seat, feeling strangely at peace. The chips were down; the hay was in the barn. His problems were behind him now; no more straining or worry. He either succeeded in his mission, returned to the cave, and left Magarak behind—or he died.

For a few minutes he lay drowsily back in the seat, then bestirred himself, checked distances in the locator. Two-thirds of the distance. He looked behind. Lights, swinging black shapes blurred in the distance. The same to all sides, all around the horizon. Without the locator he would be lost. He made an urgent mental note: remember the locator.

Minutes passed; Barch began to grow tense. Easy, he told himself. Either you do or you don't.

At the extreme edge of the locator the green square became visible. Barch looked ahead. There—that tall blocky tower, that irregular bluish shape.

Barch snapped off the locator, pulled the speed-control out to slow, dropped to a lower level. The tower soared above him, and Barch saw that it indeed glowed faintly green.

He started a circle, carefully threading the vertical avenues and lanes. Barges cut across his course; he caught the flash of startled faces. Easy, Barch, watch what you are doing. You don't want to meet any traffic cops now.

At the foot of the tower, he saw a wide opening—a ground-level landing deck.

He lowered the barge. A raft with a crystal dome drew alongside; Barch could see the pilot peering curiously in his direction. Barch paid no heed. The raft drifted reluctantly away.

A vast sound like a siren rattled the air. Alarm? Danger signal? Barch raised in his seat, looked in all directions. Nothing untoward seemed under way.

The ground was close, the opening, lit by greenish-yellow light was on his level. He flicked off the anti-collision circuit; started the barge toward the opening. Slowly, give him time to get clear. He watched a moment. Dead center. Good.

He opened the door, clambered back to his raft, climbed aboard. He stopped; my God, the locator. He ran back. The hole was very close. With his one hand he fumbled with the clips. One came loose, then the other. He caught it under his arm, sprinted back. The hole almost engulfed him. Aboard the raft, cast loose, away. . . .

THE air bit into his face; he hunched down, urging the raft ahead. Faster, faster. Better lie flat. He fell forward on his face.

Light splattered the sky, painted the overcast dazzling violet-white. Ah, thought Barch, the explosion. Success. He clung to the raft. Faster, faster.

There came a great wind, lifting the raft like a chip on the surf, flung it high and miles ahead. Barch glimpsed the great tower toppling, falling, smashing. There came a second explosion. Barch saw a blue blast, a tremendous fan-shaped flare, reaching instantaneously up, breaking through the over-cast. Where the tower stood was a seething

puddle of lava. The massive structures beside were mangled, torn awry, and as the great blue blast quietly died, the buildings glowed red and slumped.

The second air-wave caught Barch now, a milder, sharper impact, one which he heard as sound. Looking behind once more he wondered how many people had died, how many Klau, how many slaves. The Klau—Barch shrugged. The slaves—death was small loss to the slaves.

The raft was riding on an even keel, under control. Barch looked into the locator—peered in astonishment. The viewer showed blackness, nothing. Barch shook it, pounded it to no avail.

In sudden thought he looked behind. Did the Central Organ control the locator? In disgust and panic he tossed the mechanism behind him. He looked ahead. How had he come? Was this the right direction? All directions looked alike. There was no moon, no stars.

He looked over the side, searching for some half-noticed landmark.

The buildings bulged up, the myriad lights and vast motions were the same.

He looked behind. The tower was gone. But—there was something subtly different about the approach. Barch got the raft around, circled to the left, looking toward the former tower. Building planes shifted, flares and fires took on different patterns. Now, this looked right. It was a gamble—but the whole exploit had been a gamble. So far he had won.

Barch turned the raft away from the tower, set out at full speed.

Now the minutes dragged where before they had sped. Surely he had not been so long over these monstrous shapes, with the bristling trusses like moth antenna. He kept on. The buildings seemed to diminish. But by now he should be nearing Tchul Sea. There was no Tchul Sea in sight. He had gone wrong. Now—turn to the right or turn to the left? No. Straight ahead, another ten minutes. With anxiety gnawing at him, one minute was like ten minutes. In every direction sprawled the man-hating bulk of Magarak.

He had come wrong. And yet—a few more miles. And what was that vague blankness ahead? *Thalasse, thalasse!* had shouted Xenophon's myriad. The sea! muttered Barch. Good old Tchul Sea!

The mud flats gleaming with murky phosphorescence like dead fish passed below; ahead was the mass of the Palamkum. It was almost like home, thought Barch. Now rest. His fingers relaxed. If they spent five years in space, he'd sleep the first year. Rest, sleep. No more driving, no more plotting and planning.

Below passed the lonely lights of the stone quarry; there was the ridge of Mount Kebali. He slid down the long slant into Palkwarkz Ztvo, noticing that there was grayness in the sky. Had the night passed so soon?

There was the blasted bluff, there the seared flat, there the black opening into Big Hole.

Barch landed the raft, jumped to the ground, ran up the hill toward the cave mouth. He whistled in case anyone should be on guard, but there was no challenge.

He reached the crevice, stopped short. He frowned. Where was the thin trickle of firelight that always glowed from the gap? Had they let the fire die? Had they extinguished the lamps?

He stepped into the hall. The hearth glowed with dull coals. "Hey," Barch cried out. "Is everybody dead?"

No response, no whisper, no murmur, no slightest stir of sound. Barch ran up the passage into Big Hole. Gray light poured in through the opening. The double-barge was gone. Big Hole was empty.

Barch walked slowly to the opening. Wide. He looked up into the sky. The overcast came racing fast across Mount Kebali.

He returned to the hall, sat on the bench, held his hand to his head. The coals glowed, winked, and one by one died out. Barch sat in the cool silence.

Gray light seeped in through the crev-

ice. Barch rose, went slowly outside. He banged the stump of his left arm on the stone and felt no pain. "Well," said Barch aloud, "so much for that."

XXVI

BARCH stood in the cave opening. Light rain fell slanting down the wind, so cold as to be near-sleet; perhaps the Magarak winter was beginning. Purple-gray overcast, heavy and twisted as brains, scraped the black ridges. The notch at the mouth of the valley was blurred; the black fronds of the forest shook and rattled.

He returned inside the cave, threw wood on the coals, watched the smoulder start up into little flames, grow to a blaze.

He turned away, and without reason climbed the passage into Big Hole. Watery gray light entered through the gap, twenty feet high, fifty feet wide; he could not possibly fill it in alone. He shrugged, turned away, looked around the cavern.

He was still lord of vast properties—the cargo of sustenators, less the three for the ship and two in the hall. There were crates of welding tape, the igniter, the cutting tools, spools of cable, a respectable pile of decking. The explosives were used up, all the *accr* had gone with the double-barge. Oddments, scrap, broken crates littered the uneven half of the floor. Nothing of value or immediate usefulness.

Barch started back down to the hall, then stopped. Something had to be done about the hole. With only one hand, piling up a wall of rocks was out of the question. But he could rig a makeshift screen, lashing up the deck-sheets with cable and maybe throwing a few branches against the outside for camouflage.

He returned to the hall, fed himself from the sustenator. The fire was warm, the rain hissed outside. He felt drowsy, torpid. He dozed for a few moments, then awoke with a start. Voices? Sweet woman-voices? Heart thumping like a hammer, he jumped up, peered around the hall. Nothing. He looked down the back passage, listened. Silence. He went out to the crevice, scanned the sky. The rain had become a heavy lashing torrent; the black fronds bowed, shivered; the forest sighed, wind moaned down the valley.

Barch went up to Big Hole, worked furiously, half in the rain, half out. When he had finished, a double row of panels hung across the hole, flapping and bumping. Not good, but better than nothing.

He went back to the hall, sat staring into the fire, and so the day passed.

On the fourth morning, overcome by restlessness, he took up the raft. He landed precariously on the summit of Mount Kebali, stood looking out across Quodaras District. A smell of smoke hung in the air. Along the horizon Barch saw no less than twenty plumes of leaden vapor sweeping down the dank wind. As he watched a star-shaped flash of red fire burst up in the middle distance. Half a minute later, he felt a dull shock on his face, heard a rumble like thunder. Resisting the temptation to fly out over the city, Barch returned to the cave.

He spent half a day piling fronds of vegetation against the Big Hole panels. Backing off to inspect his work, he saw a barge sliding down into the valley.

BARCH ran to the cave mouth, ducked behind his gun. He sighted through the finder; his hand went to the trigger. . . . He frowned, squinted. These were no Podruods; in fact, there were women standing at the rail as well as men. Fifty or sixty of them, a bedraggled lot, apparently all of the same race, with skin and features not unlike his own.

The barge settled to the flat. The stairs snapped out, a thin bald man with a shrewd round face jumped to the ground, followed by a tall youth with short dark hair. Barch could hear the voices, but not the words.

After a moment the rest of the passengers climbed down the ladder, stood look-

ing uncertainly around the flat. The thin bald man spied Barch and the gun. He crouched. The others, following his gaze, froze in consternation, their voices dwindled.

Barch called out in the Magarak pidgin-tongue, "Come up here where I can talk to you." The thin bald man and the dark-haired youth approached warily. "What brings you here?" Barch asked gruffly.

The thin man looked carefully behind Barch into the crevice. "You might call us fugitives. What about you?"

"The same."

The dark-haired youth said quietly aside, "If wild men come any wilder, let's go back to Podinsiras where it's safe."

"Might be he's a little off his rocker."

Barch smiled bitterly. "I speak English myself."

The newcomers stared at him.

"Forget it," said Barch wearily. "So I am a wild man; so I am off my rocker." He nodded toward the barge. "All of you from Earth?"

"We're what's left of Oakville, Iowa."

"Never heard of it."

"The Klau dropped an army around town, herded us into their ship. This was two, three months ago. What's been going on since, we don't know; the slave revolt gave us a chance to bust loose."

"Slave revolt?"

"Yep, started about four days ago. Somebody blew up the main headquarters with most of the Klau big shots. Ever since Magarak's been a madhouse."

"Well, well," said Barch. "And now what do you intend to do?"

"Well," said the thin man, "we figured we'd try to get back to Earth by hook or by crook. My name's Smith, by the way; this is my son Tim."

"I'm Roy Barch."

Smith gestured to the barge. "I understand these things run on the same principle as the space-ships—grab at space and pull themselves along. Now if maybe we could make one of these airtight—"

Barch sat down on a rock, ran his hand through his hair.

"What's the matter?" asked the thin man. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No," said Barch. "It's just that you've come to the right place. I organize these parties. I'm a specialist on them." He heaved a deep sigh. "You really want to leave Magarak?"

"Naturally."

"You're willing to work, take a few risks, maybe—" Barch held up the stump of his left arm.

"Yes!"

"All right, you've got a partner. Let's get busy. Take your barge around the corner. I'll let down the sheets, we'll slide it into the Big Hole."

Barch jumped to his feet. Smith and his son Tim backed away a little.

"I'm harmless," said Barch. "Just anxious. This time I'll do it right."

"Sure, sure," said Smith soothingly.

"Tonight we go out stealing. I know the routine cold. First we get the *accr* at the quarry. Next we go after Lenape and the sustenators. . . . But we've already got plenty sustenators and we can do without the Lenape. . . . On second thought we need a few Lenape. Something might go wrong with the inner workings en route and none of us could fix it."

Smith asked anxiously, "You feeling all right, son?"

"I feel fine," said Barch. "Let's get busy."

DOUBLE-ARK II rose into the twilight. Barch looked down into Palkwarkz Ztvo, hating the black forest, the black mountains, the interminable drizzle. And yet—he looked along the length of the valley—he had experienced a great deal here; he had accomplished much. "Wish I had a photograph of the place," he said over his shoulder to Tim.

Tim clutched his arm. "Look."

Barch twisted sharply. Through the clouds flickered a dozen long dark shapes. The overcast swirled aside for an instant; the shapes showed as long

torpedoes. The overcast closed; the shapes were gone.

"Those weren't Klau ships," said Barch thoughtfully.

"No, I guess not."

"I thought I saw some kind of emblem on the first one."

Tim hesitated. "I did too. But I think I was wrong. It couldn't be what I thought it was."

"United Nations emblem?"

"But it couldn't be."

"No. It couldn't be. . . . Of course we were building space-ships, but—it's impossible."

XXVII

THERE was a knock on the door of Barch's room in the St. Francis Hotel. Barch looked up from the newspaper. "Who is it?"

"Tim Smith."

Barch rose to his feet. "If it's a reporter, I'll break your neck."

He swung open the door. Tim Smith came in. "Just me."

Barch looked up and down the corridor, shut and locked the door. "I've been besieged the last couple days." He rapped the newspaper with the back of his hand. "I'd like to know how this stuff got out."

Tim Smith picked it up.

RAZING OF ENEMY WAR INDUSTRIES REACHES HALFWAY MARK.

Is that what you're talking about?"

"No," said Barch. "This feature article, by-lined Cyril Heats." He took the newspaper. "Listen.

The break-up of the Klau Empire under the pounding of the Great Lenau-Lekthwan-Earth-Bakaima Coalition is now history, and Earthmen will always glory in the fact that their fledgling Space-Navy dealt the first effective blow against the Klau slave-worlds.

As a significant sidelight to this tremendous epoch in our history comes the news that one Roy Barch of San Francisco, captured by the Klau five years ago, can claim the honor of being the first Earthman to strike back at the Klau.

A few days ago the epic four-year voyage of the Double-Ark II was chronicled on these pages. Readers will remember that a heroic group of Earthmen, enslaved during the original Klau raids, won back to Earth in a make-shift space-ship. It has now been revealed that the great Magarak slave revolt, which contributed so strikingly to the success of the original Punitive Expedition, was the result of Barch's one-man assault against the Klau. . . .

Barch threw down the paper. "It goes on from there. Barch this, Barch that!" He ran his hand through his hair. "What beats me is, how did it get out?"

"Somebody must have spilled the beans," said Tim blandly.

Barch darted him a keen look. "I've already got an idea of who I can thank."

"I wanted to make sure you got what was coming to you," said Tim. "Keys to the city, gold-plated hook for your trick arm, a Roy Barch Memorial. . . ."

Barch glared.

"Take it easy," said Tim. "You know you love it."

Barch laughed. "It might get me a job. I borrowed five hundred bucks from my uncle. He said it was all my own fault, that I never should have fooled around the Lekthwans to begin with."

"Speaking of Lekthwans," said Smith, "look at this." He pointed to an article low on the page.

"I saw it," said Barch.

THE helicopter landed on the terrace of dark blue glass. Barch jumped out. "I won't be too long," he told the pilot.

The pilot lit a cigarette. "Take your time; you're paying for it."

Barch walked slowly around the terrace. To his right was the rococo balustrade of blue and white striped glass; to the left rose the crystal walls apparently so transparent, so confusing to the eye. It was very familiar; but it looked small, like a scene remembered from childhood, and a little dreary.

He passed by the alcove which had housed Markel's air-boat. There was the boat, shining and glistening as if Barch

and Claude Darran had only just finished polishing it.

He went on. There—on that very spot Claude Darran's body had lain. And there—he looked up. Approaching was a young Lekthwan, gold skin splendid in the sunlight. He wore black trousers, a soft black cloak and cap. Many times Barch had seen Markel in the same garb; it gave him a curious pang of timelessness.

The Lekthwan halted in front of Barch. "Why are you here?" he asked courteously.

Barch said, "I might ask the same of you." Same insufferable Lekthwan superiority, he thought. Somehow it had lost the power to do more than irk him.

The Lekthwan bowed slightly. "I am Acting Commissioner for Sector Commerce."

"Who is Commissioner?"

"There has been no full Commissioner since Tkz Maerkl-Elaksd."

Barch said slowly, "I came up for two reasons. I left some belongings here five years ago."

The Lekthwan frowned. "Incomprehensible. . . . Five years ago Tkz Maerkl-Elaksd was in residence."

"That's correct, but it doesn't matter. The second reason is coming up now."

The Lekthwan turned. "The ship from home," he murmured. "Please excuse me; can you come some other day?"

"No," said Barch. He went to lean on the balustrade. . . . Five years ago he had stood here watching a great vivid ball come rushing up to the terrace. And just so had the ball locked to the landing stage, just so had a child run forth, just so had Komeitk Lelianr stepped out on the dark blue glass.

There were changes. The child was a boy, and his skin was a pale clear gold. Komeitk Lelianr was quieter, thoughtful, though she looked a little older. And Barch's heart had not been pounding then as it was now.

She saw Barch immediately; indeed her eyes swept the terrace as if she were seeking him. She stopped in midstride. Her mouth tightened; Barch saw her eyebrows and eyelashes move in a quick series of characterizations.

She hesitated only an instant, then walked over to the balustrade. "I had not expected to see you here, Roy."

"I suppose not."

"You look very well. . . . How long have you been home?"

"About two weeks. How about you?"

She spoke in a careful voice. "We made a fast voyage; eight months. The Lenape were able to work out a space-drive."

"We had no Lenape. We were all Earthmen."

"Oh? Then how did you find your way home?"

"By a very simple means. Perhaps it may strike you as primitive. After we left Magarak we searched the sky. In one direction, in only one direction could we expect to find familiar constellations: in the direction diametrically across the Sun from Magarak. We found Orion, very small, very faint. We started in that direction, and kept on going."

"That's very ingenious. . . . I was sure you would get home."

Barch smiled grimly. "I was never quite so sure."

She looked out into the warm air, hazy with afternoon vapor. "I feel I must explain to you—"

"Forget it," said Barch. "I know all about it. It wasn't your idea. The Lenape said, 'The crazy man is gone; now is a good time, we'll escape him and his mad ideas as well as the Klau,' and everybody thought it was a good idea."

"No," she said. "Not I."

"No. You kept your mouth shut. It was none of your concern, you told yourself. But you did have qualms. You hesitated. And they said, 'Hurry, are you coming or not?' And you went."

Her eyes were still searching the hazy distances. The little boy came up to her; absently she stroked his hair. "That's very close. . . . I realized that I owed you my life, but on Magarak my life was worth nothing to me; and I owed you

nothing. I realize now that I owe you my freedom, and now my life and freedom are very precious." She turned, met his eyes. Barch fascinatedly watched the shift of her eyebrows. "And I will pay, in whatever way I can."

Barch smiled. "What's the name of this characterization?"

Her mouth set angrily. "I mean it."

Barch shook his head. "You owe me nothing. My motives in protecting you, in trying to leave Magarak were completely selfish."

"Nevertheless—I profited, and you lost. I must make adjustment."

"Adjustment?" He eyed her speculatively. "Exactly how do you mean, adjustment?"

"I can give you money."

Barch nodded. "I suppose you could."

She looked to where the young Acting Commissioner conferred with a tall majestic Lekthwan in a claret-red cloak. "If you cared to come to Lekthwa—to study, or for curiosity—you would be the guest of myself and of my people for as long as you liked."

"No, thanks. I've had enough space-travel. I'm glad to be home."

Her skin coppered with blood. "This obligation weighs me down; I must rid myself of it!"

"Well, what's next on the list?"

She looked up full into his eyes. "If you want me, I will be your mate, your wife." The words seemed to push themselves through her lips.

Barch grunted. "No thanks. Five years ago I learned the hard way. I sure did."

"That was Magarak, when I had no choice."

"What's the difference? If I wanted to marry, I'd want a wife, not a white elephant. We'd never be happy together. We don't think alike. You're contemptuous of my race. Here on Earth, we're learning to beat prejudice; you've got that still ahead of you. How would I feel married to a woman who's ashamed to introduce me to my own son?"

KOMEITK LELIANR very deliberately turned to the little boy, spoke in Lekthwan. He turned, looked at Barch with a new look of wonder and awe. Barch patted his head. "Poor kid, there's no point dragging him into this mess. . . . There's no mess anyway. Even on the improbable assumption that I loved and respected you, we have nothing in common. Our people have nothing in common. You've gained your plateau, you live beautiful lives. We're still working. I hope we never hit this plateau; I hope there's always enough tribulation and grief and confusion to keep us sweating and cursing each other." He looked down at the little boy. "What's your name, young fellow?"

Komeitk Lelianr said hurriedly, "He doesn't understand English."

"I suppose you're fitting him out with a hundred different personalities."

Komeitk Lelianr's jaw set. "I am teaching him to be a Lekthwan."

Barch grinned. "Don't worry. You've suffered for him, he's yours. . . . Well, enough of this. I'll pack up my gear and move on."

She looked up at him intently. "You've changed a great deal, Roy."

"I suppose I have."

"But in some ways you remain the same."

"How so?"

"When we first met, you didn't like the Lekthwans."

"No." Barch looked back along the avenues of the past. "I had a sneaking hunch that they might be right when they claimed to be superior, and it hurt my vanity. Now I know better. I don't have any personal feeling either for or against Lekthwans. We're all humans. . . . Oh, I've changed all right."

"Perhaps I've changed too."

"But you're still a Lekthwan and I'm an Earther."

"You seem a great deal more conscious of the fact than I."

Barch started to protest, then caught himself up short. Perhaps he had not changed so much in five years as he had

thought. "Human minds are just too damn complex," he said inconsequentially.

Komeitk Lelianr shrugged; she seemed to have lost interest in the conversation.

Barch asked stiffly, "How long do you stay on Earth?"

"Only a day or so. I came for my father's belongings."

"And then?"

"And then—I will go back to Lekthwa." She spoke listlessly. "It is not the home I remembered. . . . Somewhere I have caught a strange uneasiness. I have been excited talking to you." She looked thoughtfully up into his face.

He turned away. "I'll pick up my gear and be off. "

She said nothing. He took a step away. "Good-by."

"Good-by, Roy."

He walked swiftly to the little room he had shared with Claude Darran. It was quite empty. Nothing I wanted anyway, thought Barch.

He returned to the terrace. Komeitk Lelianr still stood leaning back with her elbows on the balustrade. She was looking at him; she radiated an attraction, a new-physical force that impelled him toward her. He took a short step forward, halted. She looked at him with a curious expression neither inviting nor forbidding. Barch took a deep breath.

"Good-by, Ellen."

"Good-by, Roy."

He ran to the helicopter, jumped in. The pilot was reading a magazine.

"Let's go," said Barch.

The pilot stretched languidly. "Finish so soon?"

"Finish?" muttered Barch. "What do you mean 'finish?' There's nothing in life that has a finish."

"You're beyond me there, mister."

"Let's go," said Barch shortly.

The pilot looked down the terrace. "That young lady is coming down this way."

Barch slowly stepped out of the cab. He saw that she was breathing very hard. Her mouth was firm, pale, tight. "Well?"

"I don't want you to leave."

"But—"

"Roy—it's taking a chance. I'm willing if you are."

He made no pretense of misunderstanding. "A big chance. You'll be cut off from your people."

"Perhaps, perhaps not. . . . Are you afraid?"

Barch looked at her long seconds. Something warm broke inside him. "No. I'm not afraid."

Featured in the Next Issue

THE BIG JUMP

A Brilliant Novel of Far Galaxies

By LEIGH BRACKETT

THE TOY TIGER

By PHYLLIS STERLING SMITH

ON THIS particular afternoon I was the only visitor at Barbara Richfield's house. We were on a committee together to arrange details of the local cat show, and, as often happens, no one else was able to come. It was an easy trip for me, since the neighborhood of modest houses in which I lived had sprung up practically in the back yard of her turreted and bay-windowed relic.

We were finishing our tea—coffee in my case—when there was a scrabbling sound on the other side of one of the living room doors, a bit like a dog re-

She held the key of life in her hands—but couldn't find the door!

questing admittance.

Barbara turned swiftly in the direction of the sound. The hard efficient angles of her face softened, while her eyes— What was the expression they held? Anxiety, maybe—anxiety mingled with hope.

"You may come in, Dickie," she said.

The knob turned first one way then the other, but the door remained closed. Barbara held her breath for an instant, watching with mysterious intensity. "You have to push, too, darling. Turn it and push." She said the last words with exaggerated slowness.

There was a low whimper beyond the door.

With startling speed, she was on her feet. "That's all right, dear. Mommy will open it. Mommy's coming!" She flung the door wide.

"This is Dickie, Mrs. Grinnell," she said with dignity. She took his hand and led him into the room.

He seemed, at first glance, to be the perfect model for one of the Norman Rockwell boy scout calendar pictures. Red-gold hair, wide-set blue eyes. A handsome child. At second glance, however, the face seemed all wrong, like a snap-shot out of focus. The wide-set eyes were vacant, the well-formed mouth slack. He walked with his hands turned in slightly, as though to balance himself, and his steps were the uncertain ones of a toddler.

Barbara looked sharply at my open-mouthed countenance. "This is Dickie," she repeated with a touch of defiance in her voice. "My son."

She sat down and pulled him onto the sofa beside her. He picked at the stitching in the tapestry until she gently captured his hand. then relaxed against the cushions and stared disconcertingly at a spot just to the left of my head.

"Dickie's a bit retarded," she said in a voice so low that for a moment I doubted that it was addressed to me. "He's going to get better though. He'll be better soon." I was right. Only part of what she said was for my ears. The rest was for Dickie. She almost crooned it—"better soon," and he nodded his head back and forth as at a familiar song.

"Kitty," he said, and instantly she was leaning near to him, an expression of intense concentration on her face.

"What about the kitty?" she asked.

"Kitty," he repeated helplessly.

"Did you play with the kitty?"

He just stared at her.

"Did the kitty get out?" she asked.

At this he smiled and nodded. With almost comical speed, her expression changed back to its usual one of brisk practicality.

"Oh, damn!" she said. "That fool animal is always getting loose. I'd better go lock the barn door." She paused indecisively, as though considering two alternatives. "Would you like to come along?" she asked. "Give you a chance to see my lab."

LIKE the meddlesome old fool I am, I was instantly on my feet, anxious to see as much as possible of the house. I had been disappointed by its lack of luxury. But a lab! To someone like me who keeps new kittens under the kitchen stove, a laboratory for the breeding of cats was sufficiently fabulous to maintain my belief in the eccentricities of millionaires. I trotted along behind Barbara like a child being offered an ice cream cone.

We went down a wide stairway that descended from the main hall of the house. My eyes must have been darting around like a snake's tongue as I tried to take in everything and still keep up with Barbara's swift pace. Suddenly I got a cold feeling in the back of my neck. I turned. Dickie was following me. I had to suppress a shiver. I reminded myself sternly that he was just a child.

My first glance at the "laboratory" showed me that I had misunderstood its purpose, although just what it was for still baffled me. It was a queer hodgepodge of things—some of the stuff reminded me of my one and only venture into the field of chemistry—I was a col-

lege freshman at the time, which was a long way back. Test-tubes and Bunsen burners and the like. And part of it was just plain kitchen, with a gas range and a refrigerator, and such prosaic items as cereal and gelatin desserts showing on the open shelves. Then there were cages of laboratory animals—white mice and rabbits—and scales, and a series of charts on one wall, marked neatly with ink in some spots and red pencil in others.

There were no cages of cats, though, for which I was thankful, as I don't consider that the proper way to treat them. There were cats around, apparently with the free run of the place. While I watched, a beautiful Persian insinuated itself through the partly opened window high above the sink and bounded down with insolent grace to arch its back and rub against Barbara's leg.

"Which way did he go, Dickie? Can you tell me?" she asked the child urgently, but softly.

He turned the toe of his shoe so that it faced its neighbor and kicked intently.

"Could you point, dear?" She pointed a finger to herself. "Here's Mommy." Her finger moved to Dickie. "Here's Dickie," she intoned, then paused. "But where's Kitty?" she asked dramatically.

Silence. He smiled foolishly.

"There he is now," she exclaimed, and darted after the bright-striped cat that had stalked in through the open door. It stood there, superbly graceful, its tail switching back and forth. I gasped with surprise and delight.

Did I say that I breed Siamese? I have always fancied the short-haired varieties of cats, but had understood that Barbara's were all Persians. Not this fellow, though. He was a short-haired one, all right. His coat was more like velvet than fur, and it was striped clearly and minutely, with black and orange and white. A gorgeous thing, for all the world like a miniature tiger. A prize winner, no doubt about it.

Barbara picked him up with a practiced hand. "Close the window, will you?" she said. "The door, too. I'm trying to keep this fellow locked up until his unveiling next week at the auditorium. Isn't he a beauty?" She held him out and examined him with frank pride. "I was going to keep him a secret. Still am, except for you."

We admired him together, our minds in perfect rapport. If I knew anything about it, this was the start of a new breed. His coat wasn't the only thing that differentiated him from other cats. He was longer, slimmer, and—I considered a moment—his head was smaller. Maybe that indicated lower intelligence, but who chooses cats because of their intelligence? If it's conversation one wants, one chooses a human, not a pet.

"Kitty," said the tall child beside me, and I was glad I had not spoken my thoughts aloud.

Barbara lowered the cat gently to a point where Dickie could reach it. He, in turn, took it with matching gentleness, and from inside the cat came a deep rumble of contentment. Barbara watched the little scene intently, almost hungrily.

"He's getting better," she said, half to herself. "A year ago he pulled their tails. I think the treatment is really working this time. See how gentle he is?"

"As he gets older he should mature some, shouldn't he?" I asked, and could have bitten off my silly blundering tongue.

Her face was suddenly older than the careful makeup and hairdo would lead one to believe.

"It's all a matter of diet," she whispered. "There has to be a reason. Some component missing." She looked at me with tortured eyes. "It's my fault that Dickie's this way. It was my vanity. I didn't want to lose my figure. I thought I could keep my husband— I dieted, you understand. I left out some of the essentials. It's my fault he's retarded—"

HER VOICE stopped. I could almost see the mental effort with which she pulled herself together, stopped the flow

of unaccustomed confidences. When she spoke again, it was in a normal voice, even a little more flat and unemotional than usual.

"Let's have a cup of coffee," she said. "That's one thing I like about my lab. I can make a cup of coffee without tripping over the cook. Now, about the judging—" and she went on about the details of the cat show as though we had never been interrupted.

I sipped my coffee and half-listened, my eyes taking in everything about the cluttered basement room.

"What do you do here?" I blurted out at last. "I've been looking this place over and I get more and more curious. What are you? A chemist? A biologist?"

She laughed. "A little of everything, I'm afraid. Interested in nutrition. I brew up concoctions and feed them to the animals—" And to Dickie, I added mentally. I thought I saw the meaning of the scales, of the carefully kept charts. It occurred to me that Dickie was probably the most weighed and measured child in existence. My heart turned over with pity for this youngish old woman who was trying to change innate ability with techniques like an alchemist of old might have used.

"Of course," I said heartily, trying to cover my thoughts before they could be read. "The mice and rabbits. What else do you use in your experiments? What sort of animal did you have in the big cage?" I hurried on with nervous embarrassment, thinking again of Dickie. The big cage was an extremely sturdy affair of iron bars and solid planking—the sort one associates with circuses or zoos.

It took me a moment to be aware of the silence. In an instant the cozy kitchen-like atmosphere of the untidy little laboratory had become strained and unfriendly. What had I said? I remember with chagrin that I kept right on chattering during the next few minutes while I was politely but firmly shepherded up the stairs and out the front door.

I had blundered. I had been dismissed.

I saw Barbara next at the cat show. She spoke to me coolly, and I, of course, had my feelings thoroughly bruised. Her cat was every bit as sensational as I had imagined it would be, and was widely hailed as the most important new introduction in years.

Since the ordinary house cat, or alley cat, is often referred to as a tiger cat, Barbara had wisely avoided the name for her animal. We called it "Toy Tiger"—and very appropriate the title was. Its coloring was like nothing in the world but the bright stripes of the tiger in the zoo. I soothed my ego by remembering that I had been the first to see it. It took the grand prize, of course, and was off to the national show.

I went back to heating milk for the kittens, and horse meat and liver for their mothers. None of these canned cat foods for me.

When the phone rang a few nights later, I was happy to hear Barbara's voice. I hate being snubbed. It was a relief to be back in her favor. She sounded nervous and tired, and wanted to know if I could come over right away.

No one answered my ring, so I let myself in through the unlocked front door. Someone was moving about in the basement.

As I descended, I found myself looking around me furtively, half afraid that Dickie Richfield might be hidden somewhere in the poorly lighted corners of the stairwell. Maybe that's why my first question was, "Where's Dickie?"

Barbara looked at me abstractedly, as though she couldn't quite think what I was talking about. Her hair was mussed, and she was wearing a stained brown lab apron. "Dickie?" she said. "Oh, he's in bed. Thanks for coming. I thought you could help, especially since you didn't tell. I know I can trust your discretion." She smiled disarmingly, and I gaped.

She studied me, and her smile faded. "Don't tell me you didn't know!" she said ruefully. "I thought when you asked about the big cage that surely you knew—" She shook her head. "But, no.

I keep forgetting how fantastic it is. It took me the longest time to believe—"

She looked at me closely, as though trying to reach some decision. "I need your help," she went on. "I called you because I thought you knew—I was afraid at first that you'd give me away. But I think I can trust you." She reached far back on a shelf and pulled out a miniature cage that seemed to be put together with pins for cage bars. Inside were—

I GAVE a squeal that made both of us jump. They were mice! Their pink eyes no larger than pin-heads; their tails were mere sinuous threads. Each mouse was no bigger than—well, a honey bee would be a pretty good comparison.

"What I thought you knew," she said deliberately, as though explaining to a child, "was that my Toy Tiger was a real tiger. Full scale. Half a ton of wild animal when he came here in the big cage. Before I fed him Reductisone. That's my name for it. No one else knows about it. Reductisone."

She set the cage of tiny mice back on the shelf. "I tried it on these fellows first. After Dickie—" She shivered slightly. "That was the time that I really reaped the reward for scientific method. I thought it was one of the missing factors—that Reductisone was. Dickie lost half an inch in height the first day I fed it to him. I saw it on the charts and stopped that in a hurry. But then I got to thinking. A miniature tiger—" Her eyes took on the slightly glazed look of the fanatic, and I knew how she felt. The Toy Tiger was beautiful. Beautiful.

She frowned again. "But I'm not a scientist. That's my trouble. I just dabble. Just try and try because I have to—for Dickie. And I didn't test it thoroughly first. I thought that one dose would make my tiger a toy tiger forever." She looked at me, as though for support. I nodded. "But the fact of the matter is that Toy Tiger is—well, he's growing again."

Things were moving too fast for me. I couldn't take it all in. "Isn't he dangerous even when he's small?" I asked, remembering fearfully how close I had stood to him at the cat show. "I mean—all that strength in capsule form."

Barbara bit nervously at a finger nail. "It doesn't work that way at all. His muscles are proportionately weaker when he's little. One of the other cats got into a fight with him once and just tore him up. Do you think I'd let Dickie play with him if he were dangerous? It does something to his disposition, too. Tiger's a gentle little thing." She paused and added softly, "Tiger and Dickie love each other."

"I should think that would settle it, then," I said with a brisk attempt at efficiency. "You'll just have to keep Tiger small if you want him to be a little boy's pet. Just feed him more of the what-do-you-call-it. Reductisene. Reductisone," I finished triumphantly, impressed by my own scientific judgment and memory.

She laughed a short bitter laugh. "Don't you think I've tried? I've given him more—and I've given him bigger doses. So far, I've succeeded pretty well. But now I've run out of it. That's why I called you. I thought I'd distill a big lot of it, and I found that I needed an extra hand or two. I suppose I should have asked a chemist, but—" Her face reddened slightly. "It's my secret, after all, and I don't want it known. You're a good cook, aren't you?"

I nodded, unsure of the direction of her questioning, but confident that I could turn out as good a souffle as the next woman.

"It's really not difficult," she said, and pulling a pad of paper toward her, she wrote on it with a stub of pencil, occasionally licking the point as she paused to think. "Here is your part of it. Call it a recipe, if you want. The jars over by the stove are numbered, and if you just follow the directions exactly, you'll finish your part at the same time I finish mine. If we can put them together instantly, that's that. Enough Reductisone to keep Tiger as small as a kitten, if we wanted to."

I EXAMINED the directions carefully, and, sure enough, she had even translated the measurements into teaspoons and tablespoons. That wounded my pride a little. After all, I *had* taken freshman chemistry.

I got to work right away, though, remembering that timing was important, only glancing up once in a while to see Barbara rush from burner to a queer assortment of flasks and glass tubes and back again. She kept tucking a wisp of straw-colored hair back of her ear, absently. One bobby pin would have taken care of it permanently, but she didn't seem to know what she was doing.

I was just finishing my part of the "recipe," when there was a scratching sound high on the wall. My startled search revealed a sort of speaking tube or intercommunication speaker. "Mommy!" it wailed softly in Dickie's voice; then more urgently, "Mommy!"

Barbara spun with a distraught look, and her elbow caught the edge of her shelf, setting the glass vessels to wobbling violently. With a purely reflex action, she put out both hands to steady them, and overdid it. Her left hand hit a flask of amber fluid, and it arced to the floor, shattering into a shower of glittering splinters, while the fluid edged sluggishly across the linoleum.

The voice called again, and with an appalled glance at the wreckage, she dashed toward the stairs, calling, "I'm coming, Dickie. Mommy's coming."

This time I followed without being invited.

Dickie was sitting up in bed, and, under the circumstances, he looked like any small boy awake in the night and frightened. The slackness of his mouth might be sleepiness. His blank eyes were hidden by the sleep-heavy lids with their beautiful red-gold lashes.

Barbara put her arms around him and hugged him close to her. She rocked him back and forth, until the eyes closed completely, then laid him gently back onto the pillow.

As she backed away from the bed, stepping stealthily, even though the rug was as soft as deep moss, I had to clap my hand over my mouth to keep from crying out.

For there on the pillow, next to the child, stretched a bright-striped crouching figure, amber eyes glowing in the half dark. Tiger! I could see with horror that he was almost the size of a bobcat. No small household pussy now, but a half-grown wild thing.

I must have stood there with my hand to my mouth for longer than I thought, for Barbara stepped back and guided me out of the door, closing it softly behind her.

"You've seen it now," she said in a low voice. "You see why I'm worried." She rubbed a finger nervously across the bridge of her nose. "Worried doesn't really express it. I'm frantic since I spilled the stuff down there. It'll take me days to replace it, and all the while he'll be growing—"

"Nonsense," I quavered. "You'll have to put him back in the big cage, and you'll have to do it right now while you can handle him. We can't have a full-grown tiger loose in the neighborhood!"

"I suppose I'll have to, won't I?" she said with curious indecision. "It will be hard on Dickie, though. He won't go to sleep without Tiger—"

"Hard on Dickie?" I said indignantly. "Do you think it's going to do him any good to have a ravening beast for a bosom companion?"

"I suppose not," she said indecisively. "Do you think I should go in and get him —now?" I was amazed at her reluctance. Still— I wondered suddenly how a mindless thing like Dickie would react to the loss of his pet. With unconsolable sorrow? With anger?

"Right now," I said firmly, and she turned without a word and re-entered the room.

We carried the big animal down the stairs in silence, and put him into the sturdy cage of oak and iron. His tail was switching dangerously, and there was a wild light in his eyes. I didn't feel really

safe until Barbara had snapped the combination padlock that held the door, and he was securely in place.

Barbara was disturbed when she looked at the clock. "So late!" she said. "I've kept you longer than I intended. Why don't you stay until morning? We have plenty of room. None of the servants sleep in any more. Not since I imported the tiger."

I understood their reluctance. However, a glance at the dark square of window assured me that I would not enjoy a walk home through the poorly lighted streets, near though my own house was. I accepted gratefully.

I had a hard time getting to sleep. When I did, I dreamed of cats in assorted sizes—ranging from penny ones to hundred dollar ones. The latter were fearsome, so naturally I bought one, and—

I WAS awakened by someone shaking my shoulder.

It was Barbara. "Can you come right away?" she asked. "I want you to see something. I—I don't know what to think."

She waited impatiently while I dressed. She was clad in a dressing gown —an elegant brocaded thing that contrasted oddly with her uncombed hair and lined face devoid of makeup, stark in the first gray light of dawn.

"Come softly," she whispered. "I don't want it to know were watching." She tiptoed ahead of me to a point on the stairs where we could see the entire floor area of the basement laboratory.

I looked immediately to the big cage. But was it really so big after all?

The animal inside it was crowding it to capacity, folds of luxuriant fur bulging through the bars, thick tail switching to and fro through the rear of the cage, great head crowded against the front of it.

I opened my mouth to speak, but Barbara gripped my arm and pointed again to the cage.

One platter-like paw had found its way through the bars, and the other joined it, to clasp the combination padlock. I held my breath, hardly daring to believe. It swiveled the lock back and forth lazily, but with assurance. It couldn't be, of course—but it looked as though it were trying to work the combination!

She motioned me back up the stairs, and I followed her silently. She went into the living-room and sank down on the corner of a gold damask ottoman. She looked triumphantly at my stunned expression, nodding with satisfaction. "So I'm not crazy!" she said. "You saw it, too. You wouldn't look like that if you hadn't."

"But you said you had had just a tiger," I stammered. "That beast down there is the great-granddaddy of all tigers! I had no idea they grew so large!"

"They don't," she said with quiet confidence. "Not naturally. They don't grow that large and they don't grow that smart. Have you ever seen a tiger in the zoo trying to solve even a simple latch? That baby is trying to work a combination!"

I sat down on the edge of a straight chair. I didn't want to be trapped in the deep soft cushions of an arm chair, not while somewhere below my feet that thing was plotting to get out.

"This is the way I reason it," she said. "He bounced back to normal even faster than I expected because he hadn't had Reductisone all day yesterday—and I had been giving him bigger and bigger daily doses. The reason he needed bigger doses was that he was developing something—we'll call it an antibody for want of a better name—to combat the effect of Reductisone. When the dose was withdrawn yesterday—you can see for yourself what happened when his big supply of antibody went to work unhampered. He's twice as big as he was originally. He drank gallons and gallons of water from the self-watering trough during the night to make up the weight as he grew. Come to think of it, he's probably twice as strong! But even more important—" her eyes glowed, "he's twice as

intelligent! In other words, whatever the antibody to Reductisone is, it's the thing I've been hunting for all these years—the factor that increases intelligence!"

I must have made some gesture of protest, because she hastened with words of reassurance. "Oh, I won't rush into it too fast. I'll let the mice come back to super-size, and we'll run maze tests and things. I'll be very sure about it. After all, I don't want to reduce Dickie's size until I'm sure that it's going to help."

Reduce Dickie's size! I stared at her in horror.

SHE LOOKED at me earnestly. "I can't possibly tell you what this means to me," she said levelly. "If I were more of a scientist, I might try to isolate the antibody. As it is, it's enough for me that the body can manufacture it in response to Reductisone. Of course, I'll use it on Dickie if it works reliably on the other animals! Don't you think I'd do anything to hear him call 'Mommy' and know that he really meant *me*, not just any person who could help him?" Her voice broke.

It was hard to feel anything but pity for the woman before me. The lines of fatigue and despair that had marked her face during the unrewarded years of her search were compensated for by the fierce hope that now shone in her eyes. It was almost against my will that my next words were spoken.

"But he would be a giant! It increases size and strength, not just intelligence."

She waved my words aside, and her voice grew more enthusiastic. "All right. He'd be a giant among men! A giant in physique, and intellect as well. Paul Bunyan with a brain! Is that bad?" Her voice sank. It had a dreamy quality to it as she said, "My son! A leader among men!"

"Let's go get the mice," she said with unaccustomed gaiety. "They should already be sprouting from lack of their daily dose."

Too true. She reached for the tiny cage on the laboratory shelf and pulled out only the shattered fragments that remained.

"This is annoying!" she said with a little laugh. "We'd better find them before the cats get them."

She closed the window and began a systematic search for the mice. I couldn't help. I was too aware of the great crouching animal in the cage. He wasn't trying to get out; he just watched with unblinking eyes.

Barbara found one of the "super-mice" with little difficulty. It was rummaging in a bag of feed, and she simply closed the neck of the bag with a rapid gesture. "He looks more like a white rat," she reported in a hushed voice, as she hunted for a cage of the proper size.

A thought too nebulous for expression began to form in my mind. The mouse had been caught easily. If a mouse doubled in size, he would still have only twice the intelligence of a mouse— I shook my head as though I could formulate the thought more clearly in that manner.

"Mommy," said Dickie plaintively from the stairwell. Barbara turned to look at him with the first purely happy expression I had seen on her face.

"Hello, darling," she called. He was still in pajamas and rubbing his eyes sleepily with closed fists. He gave a tremendous yawn, then saw the tiger.

"Kitty," he said in a satisfied voice, and before either of us could move, he was next to it, with his hand ruffing the hair on its muzzle. A growling sound originated from deep within the big cat, and I stood paralyzed, waiting for it to lunge. Only gradually it occurred to me that I had heard that sound before under different circumstances. It was a purr.

The big cat pressed its nose against the bars and nuzzled the boy's hand. Dickie sat down beside it, and his face subsided into vacancy.

Barbara was beside them in an instant.

I watched with terror as the cat lifted a huge paw with unsheathed claws. I

screamed, I think. The scene had a slow-motion quality to it. The woman kneeling beside the boy looked uncomprehendingly at the descending blow, then at the very instant when it would seem to be inescapable, she moved—too slowly, it seemed. But the paw missed her. She moved out of its reach and stared. She looked dazed. Dickie rubbed at his nose with one hand and clasped the other in the thick fur of the tiger.

"It—it's all right, isn't it?" she said in an awed voce. "He still likes him. Tiger likes Dickie. But he tried to kill me—"

It was more than I could stand. "I'm going," I announced unsteadily. "I've had enough of this. If you want my help again, you'll have to bring your equipment to my house. I couldn't do a lick of work with that thing looking on. I'd spill anything I touched. I'm going." I buttoned my coat on the way up the stairs, and my fingers trembled so, that I matched the buttons to the wrong buttonholes and had one left over when I was done. I couldn't help it. I had a feeling that at any moment I might hear the pad of mighty paws behind me.

By the time I reached the street, I was running, and gave the maid and cook, who were just arriving for the day, something to talk about for sure. I wondered what they thought of the goings-on in the basement.

I DIDN'T hear from Barbara for two weeks. I stewed and fretted and called myself a deserter. I went about my daily tasks with but half a mind, forever wondering what was happening in the Richfield household. I waited for her to phone, to call at the house with her materials for Reductisone. Anything that would break my mood of waiting for something dreadful to happen. I wanted, above all, to get the magic potion made so that the tiger could go back to being just a beautiful pet.

At last I decided to phone her. She had called upon me once when she needed help. Surely, it wouldn't be presumptuous of me to show my continuing interest in her affairs.

The first time I phoned, the maid answered and said that the mistress had left orders not to be disturbed. I waited an hour and called again.

Barbara's greeting was friendly but preoccupied. She inquired politely about my health, and I nearly exploded.

"You know very well why I'm calling," I said. "Here I haven't been able to sleep nights, thinking about you and that big cat. When are you going to get the what-do-you-call-it that you need to make Reductisone?"

"Oh, I've made a new batch of it," she assured me, and I thought I detected something odd in her voice—like guilt, perhaps. "Since you seemed unhappy here the last time, I just contrived some mechanical help. By arranging things right, I got by with my own two hands."

I felt the tension ooze out my muscles.

"Thank goodness!" I said. "Then Tiger's back to tabby size! Just be sure you keep him that way!"

She sounded almost like a school girl caught out after hours. "Well, as a matter of fact, I haven't used it on Tiger. I had to get another cage for Tiger. He's outgrown the old one."

"Still growing!" I shouted, and had to push the telephone receiver away from me to keep from deafening myself. "Are you crazy?"

"No. Not crazy. Why do you think he keeps right on growing? I think it's because I tried to keep him small for a long time. If I give him more Reductisone now, what will he grow to be next time it's withdrawn? Frankly, I don't dare risk it."

I couldn't speak for a moment as the picture took shape in my mind. So that was what came of tampering with nature's ways!

I spoke earnestly now. I tried to put the whole force of my convictions into my next words. "Shoot him, Barbara. Get a gun and shoot the animal. What else can you do? You can't keep an overgrown tiger in your house forever. And

if you let a creature like that loose in the jungle, he would be a menace to every human in the area—huge, extra strong, diabolically clever."

"I think I would shoot him," she said, "except for Dickie. Tiger's the one thing that Dickie really cares about, and Tiger must feel the same way. He's so gentle with Dickie, that I don't even worry now that Dickie's so small—"

I could feel myself turning cold. A shiver started under my scalp and slithered down my backbone.

"Do you mean to say that you've actually used the Reductisone on Dickie—made him into a miniature?" My own voice sounded strange to me.

"I don't expect anyone else to understand," she said patiently. "The mice performed beautifully in the maze tests. I have the smartest mice in captivity. Why should I withhold the same benefits from my son? Besides," and her voice was trembling suddenly with pathetic eagerness. "Besides, I'm at the end of the dosage period. Tomorrow Dickie will grow again. Back to what he was and then beyond." There was silence on the other end of the line, and I began to wonder if she had hung up.

Then her voice came, almost in a whisper. "What do you suppose he will say to me?" she said.

I was filled with a mixture of pity and revulsion. I suppose it was illogical of me, but while I had accepted, if not condoned, the shrinking of a tiger to pet size, the thought of the same thing done to a human made me cringe inside as though in the presence of darkest witchcraft. Even the knowledge that Barbara was acting from love of Dickie, made the thought of a shrunken, doll-like human no less repulsive to me.

I did what most people do when they can't change a situation about which they feel strongly. I tried to forget it. I avoided the Richfield house, and I found myself counting over my blue ribbons as though to reassure myself of my own ability.

But, oh, I dreamed at night!

I DIDN'T expect to hear from Barbara again. Yet, when the phone rang one night and her hushed frightened voice asked if it were me she was talking to, it all had a feeling of inevitability. The ringing of that phone, which once I had welcomed, was the pull of a leash. I couldn't escape so easily.

"Do you have a gun?" she asked. "You said something once about a gun. I—I need one now, and I've never kept one in the house because of Dickie. I've got to shoot the Tiger. He opened his cage, and I've got him locked in the basement. I don't know if I can keep him there, though."

There was a mighty roar in the background, and I felt as though one of my nightmares had come alive.

"I knew it!" I said. "He was too strong. Cages aren't made for strength like that!"

"He didn't break it," she said in a small voice. "He unlocked it. Oh, can you hurry, bring me a gun? I'm scared. I don't know how long I can keep him in the basement! Oh, please!"

"Send one of the servants next door, or to the police," I said, thinking frantically. "Or come away yourself!"

"I can't leave Dickie," she said. "He's in there with Tiger. He wouldn't sleep without Tiger. There are no servants here at night. I thought you knew that."

"Hold on, then," I said, with a desperate caught feeling. "I'll bring a gun. But stay away from the basement until I come."

I rummaged through the bottom bureau drawer for the gun I had always kept as protection against burglars. It was a wicked looking thing, with a huge gaping mouth on the end of it. I wondered doubtfully if it were big enough for killing tigers. For that matter, was it loaded? I had had some ammunition once, but I couldn't think now where I had put it. Still, I reasoned, if the gun were ready for burglars, it was probably loaded.

I struggled into my clothes, and holding the thing at arm's length, ran toward

the Richfield house. No time tonight to worry about the dark alleyways.

Barbara was waiting for me, the door half-opened. She embraced me and pulled me inside with frantic haste. Her face was gaunt and gray. With a practiced hand, she broke the gun open and examined it. "Thank God," she said. "I thought you might bring a twenty-two."

She started to the basement stairs. I might have followed, but the tiger roared, a great wild sound that reverberated fiercely. I couldn't follow. I clung to the front door, my feet bidding me turn and run while there was time.

I heard her going down. step by stealthy step. Then all I could hear was the slow thumping of my own heart. I presumed that she was at the bottom, outside the laboratory door.

There was a slow, squeaky sound. The door opening. Now there was nothing to keep the terrible thing from bounding up the stairs.

A shot. It was followed swifty by a second.

There was a muffled sound of movement, then silence.

Now began the most terrible waiting of my entire life. Where was Barbara? Had the last sound been the tiger falling? Or was he even now stalking up the stairwell? Why, oh why, was there no further sound?

It came then. A whimper. The cry of a small child in distress.

I knew what I had to do.

My normal reflexes wouldn't work. I had to lift each foot with conscious effort, as though I were learning to walk. But I moved forward.

The first thing I saw was the tiger, lying in a slowly widening pool of blood, his great saucer-like eyes glazed and unseeing.

Then I screamed.

One look was enough. I averted my eyes from the twisted broken thing that had been Barbara. But not before I had seen the dark marks on her head, on the arm laid bare of the elegant brocaded dressing gown. The marks of hands. *Giant human hands.*

I stared as though hypnotized at the third figure in the room. A great hulking shape, eight feet tall, but with the form of a ten-year old.

He was sitll whimpering softly.

"She hurted my Kitty," he said, leaning over the giant cat. "She hurted my Kitty. Bad."

Twice the size and twice the strength. Twice the intelligence, too. Last time I had seen Dickie he couldn't have told me that. Now he had a mental age of perhaps two years. Double what it had been before.

Great tears formed in his eyes and plopped down on the striped fur. He began to cry in earnest.

"Mommy!" he called. Then again to the empty house. "Mommy!"

Coming in the Next Issue

THE BLEAK AND BARREN LAND

A Novelet of Other Worlds

By GORDON R. DICKSON

Carter nodded cheerfully. "It's a hole . . . in space!"

THE LAST TEST

By ROBERT ZACKS

AS SOON as the communicator screen flashed its signal and the beefy face of Mark Pelham appeared on it, I knew I could kiss my vacation in Mars City of Pleasure good-by. He was Director of Research and he was sore; and while it wasn't me he was sore at, it might just as well have been me.

"Higgins," he said, so mad I had hope he'd bust an artery, "that precious moron of yours has locked himself in his lab and won't let me in."

Carter is hardly a moron, sir," I said as belligerently as I dared. "He's a Grade I physicist. Last month they gave him the World Medallion for work on space warps—"

"When I let you talk me into signing him," broke in the Director furiously, "you assured me he'd come up with something practical, something we could cash in on." I listened wearily as he launched into his spiel. I let him run down.

It was the same old story. I gave him the same old answer. "Look, sir," I said patiently, "You never know what will come out of pure research. Just let these scientists alone, let them play with their abstract ideas. Something big, something useful will eventually come out of it."

"Why won't he let me in his lab?" yelled Mark Pelham.

Point a gun at your head and pull the trigger, and you'll know whether it's loaded or not. Point a Space Warp. . . .

"I'll find out, sir," I said.

I cut him off.

Wearily I went toward the lab building. My job is that of Keeper Of The Scientists, you might say. I recruit them, talk the moneybags in charge of our corporation into paying them a sweet salary and appropriating dough for the best equipment, and then I spend my youthful vigor fighting off the impatient damn-it-let's-make-a-profit executives.

NORMALLY, in most big corporations, scientists are left strictly alone. A good executive knows that the study of such oddities as the effect of magnetic fields on the birth rate of rabbits may in some queer way end up in doubling the yield of corn per acre—that eventually pure research pays off big.

But Mark Pelham was not the usual corporation executive. How he ever got to be Director of Research was a story of unbelievable nepotism. He'd bypassed the psycho tests by using his family connections, otherwise he'd have been spotted immediately as a Maladjusted II type personality. (Insecure, Aggressive and Anti-Social.) The results of this big mistake showed up immediately. His hounding of my scientists had resulted in two of them resigning. Now my prize package, Carter, was in for it.

I gave Carter my special signal, two rings short, one long, and he let me in.

Carter grinned at me as he cautiously locked the door. He's a small, baldheaded man of fifty, has a sense of humor to match his brain and to a man like him Mark Pelham is a sad worm indeed.

"The Director is raising hell," I said. "You locked him out, eh?"

Carter nodded and waved the subject of the Director aside impatiently. "Look," he said enthusiastically. "I'm on the trail of something."

"What?" I asked.

He dragged me to some elaborate electronic equipment. Though I have an engineering degree, it was way over my head. I didn't even try to understand the jammed complexity of tiny magnets and circuits filling a six-cubic-inch area.

"See this?" he said. I nodded. "Watch!"

Carter pressed a button. A hum, so faint it could hardly be heard, filled the air, and in front of the equipment a strange darkness formed that reflected no light whatever. As I bent to examine it, Carter let out a yelp and pulled me back.

"Watch out," he said. "You'll get lost."

"Lost?"

Carter nodded cheerfully. "It's a hole. A hole in space."

I stared at him and tried to understand. Then I got it.

"Your work in Space Warps," I said, awed. I stared at the strange dark area. I couldn't see through it. "What can you do with it?"

"Haven't the faintest idea," admitted Carter carelessly. "Theoretically I know what this is, but not practically. It's sort of—well, a hole, that's all. Watch."

Carter took an ashtray from the table and gingerly put it close to the darkness. Zing! the ashtray snapped from his hand and disappeared into the dark area.

I watched in fascination as Carter let a rabbit get snatched through.

"Isn't it wonderful?" crowed Carter. "I'm not quite sure just what I have but I imagine it's a warping of space that isn't quite perfect. Right now, of course, I'm stymied."

"Is it worth anything in the way of money?" I asked hopefully.

Carter looked at me.

Suddenly he chuckled in an odd way.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "I wouldn't be surprised if it were worth millions. Needs another test or two."

"Wonderful," I shouted. "Oh, wait till I tell the Director."

"If you want to, go ahead," said Carter. "But you can also tell him I won't be making the last test or two for a few years. I prefer to do some theoretical work first on paper, test my computations, and in time we may—"

I moaned. "Can't you hurry that?"

"I'm sorry," said Carter firmly, "but I don't think it advisable at this stage of my research."

WHEN I told the Director he blew his top. He pounded on the table and his face got red. He delivered an ultimatum to Carter—via me, since Carter had disconnected his communicator.

"He says," I told Carter miserably as I caught the scientist leaving his laboratory, "that he invokes Clause Ten of your contract and you are discharged on grounds of non-cooperativeness. You are to leave the laboratory and your notes exactly as is and not enter again without his express permission."

Carter said icily, "He'll be sorry."

He stalked away, ignoring my plea that he be reasonable.

The next day the Director personally opened the door and searched the laboratory. According to regulations all data on new research had to be locked in the safe each night.

I stood behind the Director as he grunted, bent his fat knees and dialed the secret combination on the safe. He swung the door open, peered into the darkness of the safe and reached inside, groping.

Zing! The Director was sucked into the darkness filling the safe. I stood there, stunned and gaping.

Behind me I heard Carter's voice, breathless with excitement. "Well, he *wanted* the last test made now." He chuckled as I turned and gaped at him coming through the door.

"Huh?" I said.

"The last test was sending a human through to see where the hole in space went," said Carter, grinning. "I knew we'd never get any volunteers, even though I'm pretty sure it's a safe bet where they'd end up."

I stared at the open safe with the darkness filling the opening.

"I put the gadget in the safe, as per regulations," said Carter innocently. "Can't imagine how it was turned on. The Director reached his arm right into it, looking for my papers."

I found my voice.

"Holy cow," I gasped. "The Director—"

"He was the last test," said Carter happily. "Don't worry about him. The rabbits came through all right, so I guess he will too. According to my computations he should be sitting on a certain spot on Mars right now—not too happy, but quite healthy. . . ."

And he was too.

The Director had to come back via Space Ship at his own expense. He is a different man these days. He doesn't interfere with the scientists at all. Nor does he insist we use the new Space Warp that flung him to Mars, either. You see, there are still some bugs to be worked out of it. For some reason a man who is sent through the Space Warp becomes fluorescent.

You should see the director at night. He's quite a sight.

FOR TODAY'S SCIENCE FICTION — TOMORROW'S FACT

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The tiny Martian mother found a sweet . . .

Revenge

By

WILLIAM MORRISON

THIS time, thought Lawson despairingly, the fool had gone too far; this time it would be impossible to save him. The crowd around them was in a rage, but the rage was not blind. Instead of angry and almost meaningless shouts of "Hang the Earthman," such as he had heard last time, there were whispered consultations. And when the Martians whispered, they acted.

He didn't want Trotter to die. He himself might as well die if they took Trotter away from him. He could see that the man was frightened, that the liquor inside him wasn't enough to kill his fear, and that the hand which still held the pistol trembled. Yes, he was

frightened and dangerous. Lawson would have to act quickly, and trust to luck that the very action didn't set them off.

He seized the wrist of the hand which held the gun, and twisted. Trotter hadn't expected that, and the gun fell to the ground. A handcuff clicked on the wrist, and Lawson said sharply, "You're under arrest!"

Trotter stared stupidly at him. "Mike —you don't really mean—"

He said, "Shut up, you fool," and turned to face the crowd.

They were unimpressed. A voice said, "Do not think to save your companion, Earthman. Two men lie dead at this coward's hand. We shall have revenge."

"You'll have it. He'll be tried and punished."

"We have seen that game played before. He will be tried and released."

Lawson didn't answer that one. He merely shouted, "Make way! I'm taking him to jail!"

NO ONE budged, and he realized that he was sweating. Perspiration ran down his face, drenched his clothes, dampened the palms of his hands. They hadn't been fooled. He would have to fight his way out of the crowd, kill a dozen or so, and then go down alongside the man to whom he was handcuffed. But he wouldn't give Trotter up. No matter what happened, that he would not do.

They were whispering again, and as he stared at them they seemed to tremble slightly. That was the perspiration, of course, which had rolled into the corners of his eyes. He brushed it away with the back of his hand, and waited. The whispering would soon end, and then, their plan made and agreed upon, they would close in on him.

He changed his mind. He wouldn't give Trotter up, but neither would he shoot to kill. Two murders had already been committed, and he would not add to their number. He would fight to the end, possibly hold out till help came. They wouldn't kill him and Trotter at once unless they were forced to. They might even give the man a short informal trial before putting him to death.

He realized that when he thought of help coming he was only deluding himself. There were no troops of the Earth administration close by, there was no chance of getting word out. No one had expected trouble from the ordinarily peaceful Martians. If only Trotter hadn't been such a stupid, vicious, arrogant fool!

The whispering stopped, and his body tensed. They were going to close in on the two Earthmen.

At that moment there was a stir in the crowd. A voice, a liquid, silvery voice, said, "Go home. Please, go home."

There were muttered cries, protests. The voice said, "Do not fear, I will be revenged. But not now, not this way. Go home."

A man shouted, "We're not such fools!" and Lawson relaxed. It was a good sign when they shouted. The tautness of their own tension had slackened; they were no longer forced to whisper. He knew now that he and Trotter would not die.

A moment later the crowd around them began to melt away, and soon only he and Trotter were left, handcuffed to each other. He stared at the still frightened man, and said, "Start moving."

The other licked his dry lips, and said, "Thanks, Mike. How about taking these things off my wrist?"

"Not yet. You'll have to wear them until I get you into a cell. And then you'll have a few days to sober up and think over what you did."

"What I did? Killing a couple of lousy Martians because they wouldn't get out of the way?"

Lawson, his heart sick with disgust, didn't answer. He strode ahead, and the other man had to follow.

He was at his desk the next day when his secretary came in and said, "Some one in a glider seat to see you, Mr. Lawson. A Dr. Lo-Mran."

"Send him in," said Lawson absently. He threw down the papers he had tried to read. The thought of Trotter kept intruding, and the meaning of the latest official instructions from Earth still eluded him. Perhaps the interruption would help turn his mind to other thoughts.

A glider seat appeared in the doorway and moved slowly to his desk. Dr. Lo-Mran, he was surprised to see, was a woman. A tiny woman, a typical Martian in her delicate features, but even below the average Martian in size—enormous, however, in her dignity. He had never seen anyone with so much. She sat there, impassive in her glider, eyes shining steadily, without the slightest twinkle.

"Dr. Lo-Mran?" he asked, as if still uncertain.

"Yes, Mr. Lawson." It was the silvery voice that had saved him. "I apologize for taking up your time, but the matter is rather important."

"I realize that."

"Perhaps you do not realize entirely. The two men who were killed were my sons."

IT WOULD have hurt him less if she had struck him between the eyes with one of the sharp Martian knives. It would have hurt less if she had slashed his body to bits or blasted him with a shock gun. She had saved his life and Trotter's—and those had been her sons the fool had slaughtered.

He felt sick when he realized that it had been his fault. He should have killed Trotter long ago. He wouldn't have got the full satisfaction out of it, but he should have killed him anyway. Then this terrible thing wouldn't have happened.

His eyes seemed to blur, although the tear ducts were perfectly dry. He said huskily, "I'm sorry, Dr. Lo-Mran."

There was nothing to reply. He could only repeat stupidly, "I'm sorry."

"They were fine sons, Mr. Lawson. They were the joy of my old age. And I am too old to have more children."

"And the man who killed them—is he sorry?"

He couldn't meet her eyes. To the man who killed them, they were only a couple of lousy Martians. He said, "Trotter didn't realize what he was doing, Dr. Lo-Mran. He was slightly intoxicated."

"He will be punished—as usual?"

"I don't know how he'll be punished. That's up to the court. But don't you worry, Dr. Lo-Mran, he'll be tried soon enough."

"He is a friend of yours?"

"Well, not exactly. We're sent out on jobs together—"

"An enemy, perhaps?"

Those unblinking eyes of hers saw too much. He had hidden his feelings from Trotter and every one else, especially from Trotter, but now the hate must be showing through.

But he mustn't reveal how intense, how flaming that hate actually was. He said casually, and even managed a smile, "My own feelings for Trotter don't matter. I can assure you that he'll be tried for his crime, and—and he'll pay the penalty."

The words almost stuck in his throat, but he said them. He knew that there was never a penalty for killing a Martian.

She said, "I promised that my sons would be revenged."

He remembered that he was an official. He said, with a voice that he tried to make pompous and bureaucratic, "Revenge and punishment are a matter for the law, Dr. Lo-Mran. If you dare attempt to take them into your own hands the consequences will be most unpleasant." Of all things, he thought, for Mike Lawson to be telling some one else!

"Perhaps. I wanted to see what you were like, Mr. Lawson. Yesterday I could not get a clear view of you. But today I perceive that you are a very unhappy man. Your soul is racked with conflict."

"That's the first time I ever heard any one suggest that a Government official

had a soul."

"That is not quite a joke. Your friend's—or should I say, your enemy's—soul is very tiny, but even it can be detected. He is not a happy man either."

She fell silent, and Lawson squirmed under her unblinking examination. Damn her, how could she possibly see into his, or any one else's soul?

He listened to her silvery words of farewell, and watched the seat glide out. And then he cursed himself for being still alive, and cursed Trotter for ever having lived. . . .

FIVE YEARS ago it had happened, and in those five years he had killed Trotter a thousand times—but only in his imagination. Five years ago it was that he had come home to find his wife dead, with a short note near her body, a note that told him everything. He had known Trotter casually. He had never suspected that the man, with his handsome brutishness and coarse nature, could have had an attraction for a woman like her, or that she would have killed herself when he deserted her for some one else.

His first impulse, after burning the note, was to take a gun and hunt the man down. He himself would have been caught and punished too, but he wouldn't have minded that in the least. With his wife dead, he no longer had any reason to stay alive.

But Trotter had left town, and in the short interval between the time of the funeral and the time he returned, Lawson had a chance to think. He imagined how his wife had suffered; he felt his own suffering, and he knew that one moment of terror on Trotter's part could not possibly make up for all that the man had done. His death would have to be something long drawn out, a matter of months and years, or Lawson would gain no genuine satisfaction from it. There were methods infinitely more painful than shooting, and Lawson would study them all and choose from among them. Then, at the proper time, he would act.

He cultivated Trotter's acquaintance. At first, he knew, the man regarded him with suspicion, but Lawson took pains not to notice it, and pretended that he had no idea why his wife had killed herself. After a time the suspicion gave way to contempt. Trotter noticed that Lawson sought his company and actually appeared to like him, and in Trotter's mind, a man who acted on liking and not on naked self-interest was a fool.

After a time, the contempt too disappeared. For slowly, in their relationship, Lawson assumed the role of a protector. Trotter was always getting into trouble, and although Lawson didn't mind his being beaten up, as had happened on several occasions he wanted to be sure that the beating never went far enough to endanger the man's life. If any one was going to kill Trotter, he was. He wouldn't surrender the privilege at any price.

BOTH men were in Government service, and when they volunteered for the same kind of job, they were sent to Mars together. In their three years on the planet, Lawson had saved the other man's life twice. The first time had been from Martian fever, to which they had both supposedly been immunized. But Trotter's immunization hadn't taken, or more probably it had worn off because of his habitual drinking. He had been attacked by the disease quite suddenly, falling to the ground while giving orders to a group of Martian farmers, and Lawson, upon feeling his burning forehead, knew what had happened.

There was a vial of antidote in the medicine kit they always carried with them, but Lawson had been in no hurry to use it. He had watched the other man alternately shiver and burn; he had looked on with satisfaction as the man's body twisted in the torture of spasmodic cramps, and he had listened happily to the desperate cry for water. But he hadn't taken any chances of Trotter's dying. The moment the man's struggle

began to weaken, he had injected the antidote, and had experienced the satisfaction of seeing Trotter wince.

Trotter had recovered quickly, and never even thanked him for saving his life. Nor had he thanked him that time when they were attacked by a wild animal, porog with poisoned horns, and Lawson had saved his companion's life at the risk of his own. Trotter took these little services as a tribute to his own worth and charm, and would no more have thought of expressing gratitude to Lawson than to his mother for having borne him.

Lawson's reward was in the mental slaughter that the man's continued living made possible. Every day he thought of killing Trotter in a different way, every day he experienced the thrill of a revenge that wasn't final. In the years since his wife's death, he had done what might be called considerable research on torture. He had selected a hundred methods of inflicting agony upon Trotter without endangering the man's life, and some day, he told himself, he would try them all.

Meanwhile, Trotter went his vicious and unsuspecting way. And now he had killed two men. . . .

He would kill no more, thought Lawson. It was time to put his plans for revenge into practice. In a week Trotter would be tried and freed. That same night he would get drunk to celebrate. And when he came out of his stupor, Lawson would have him where he had long had him in imagination.

An unpleasant smile spread over Lawson's face now that his decision had finally been made. And with it, he recovered his ability to work. He picked up the papers at which he had previously been staring and read them through. They made no sense, as usual, and he tossed them into a pigeonhole and forgot about them.

The next day he received orders that made only too much sense. A farming crop had failed in the Seventh Equatorial District, where the Martians grew much of their *parria,* the clothes fiber, and emergency measures were needed to salvage as much of the crop as possible. Lawson was ordered to select a specialist squad and fly to the Seventh District at once.

Once a decision has finally been made after years of weighing pros and cons, it is not pleasant to be forced to change it. He cursed the order and damned the man who had given it. But he had no choice. The Government order had to be obeyed.

The job would take at least two months and his revenge on Trotter would have to be postponed for that time. It consoled him to remember that Trotter would still be there when he returned. Meanwhile, he would have another few weeks in which to kill the man in imagination. . . .

THE Seventh Equatorial District was a flat red area, criss-crossed by canals and irrigation ditches. Water had to be pumped, antibiotics sprayed through the air to destroy the bacteria that threatened to devour the weakened plants, pesticides scattered to kill the insect-like animals that would eat what the bacteria left. It was ceaseless routine work, much of it physical in nature, and it left Lawson no chance during the day to become absorbed in his thoughts of revenge. At night he tumbled into bed exhausted, almost too tired to think of new ways of killing Trotter.

With all their work, they saved a mere twenty-seven percent of the normal crop, and when Lawson made his report back to his home office, it was with a feeling that he had failed. He had done everything that could be done, but it hadn't been enough. He had failed, and it would be the Martians who would suffer for his failure.

He looked around the office, but there was no sign of Trotter. He spoke to his secretary about it, and the girl smiled. "That's right, you've been away and haven't heard, Mr. Lawson. Mr. Trotter isn't with us any more."

He sat down involuntarily, and his knees buckled. He asked, "Where—what happened?"

She lowered her voice, and he foresaw that she was going to enjoy what she told him. "Well, Mr. Lawson, this isn't really anything to talk about, but it seems that he was running around with a married woman."

"Really?"

"There's no doubt about it. Why any man should want to destroy some other man's happy home, I don't know, especially when there are so many attractive single girls around. Do you realize, Mr. Lawson, that the girls in the Mars offices outnumber the men four to one?"

"Unfortunate," he muttered.

"Well, anyway, it seems that the wife decided she couldn't live without him, and after he was tried for murdering those two Martians—you remember about them, don't you, Mr. Lawson?"

He nodded—he remembered.

"After he was tried and released, she threatened to tell her husband all about him if he didn't run away with her. That would have been terrible for Mr. Trotter. The news would have got to the Chief, and Mr. Trotter would have had a departmental trial, and then he'd have been fired and blacklisted, and maybe even sued for damages. So he decided that the best thing to do was to apply for a leave of absence and go with her. And the joke of the whole thing—"

"There's a joke?"

"Of course! The joke is—that her husband doesn't suspect in the least, and thinks that she's gone to Earth to visit her mother!"

"Who told you all this?" demanded Lawson.

"Why, Mr. Lawson, *everyone* knows about it. It's all over town. Even the Martians are buzzing about it!"

A rumor, thought Lawson, a deliberately planted rumor. He knew Trotter better than any one else did, and he knew the one woman to whom the man had been paying attention these past few months. She was an elderly widow, and had no husband to worry about. Her intentions were strictly honorable, and in view of her fortune, so were Trotter's. He would never have run away, either with her or from her.

He had been *taken* away. Lawson thought of Dr. Lo-Mran and her soft promise to revenge the deaths of her sons, and knew the truth. There was good reason why the rumor seemed to have spread all through the town, even to the Martians. It had been started among the Martians. Trotter had been lured into their hands, and then they had deliberately spread the rumor, perhaps even planted fake clues to mislead investigators.

They had fooled every one else, but they couldn't fool him. And if Trotter were already dead, if they had cheated him of his revenge, he would see to it that they received the punishment due them.

He spent the rest of the day in the office with a mind that paid little attention to the things he was supposed to be doing. And when quitting time came, he got into his autoscooter and headed straight for the home of Dr. Lo-Mran.

OVERHEAD it was dark, with the grey darkness of late afternoon, the small bright sun already beginning to set, the first faint stars already showing in the sky. The tiny twin moons were scurrying through the clouds as if frightened of each other. In the Martian section of town, the long overhead illumination tube was already glowing, casting the weird green light which best suited Martian eyes.

Lawson parked his scooter, locked it magnetically to one of the steel hitching posts, and strode to the door of a large grey house. To a Martian it would have seemed a comfortable enough home, glowing with ultraviolet radiance, and by no means overly elaborate. To Lawson it was a depressing and overgrown shack.

The door opened as he raised his hand to the bell, and a Martian looked out at

him. The man said, "Mr. Lawson? You are expected."

So she had known that he would see through the story and come here. Lawson smiled grimly to himself as he entered the house.

Inside he found the usual Martian furnishings—on the floor, glide-chairs and slim adjustable tables, on the walls, pictures in bas-relief. From the ceiling hung jars and boxes of odds and ends, to be made accessible by pressing the proper button on the wall.

He had little time to examine the room in detail, for Dr. Lo-Mran entered in her glider as he was looking around, and said in her silvery voice, "I am glad that you are so prompt, Mr. Lawson."

"You have nothing to be glad about, Dr. Lo-Mran. I warned you that if anything happened to Trotter you would pay for it."

The voice tinkled a mocking question, "But if you have no idea of what happened to Mr. Trotter, why do you threaten me?"

"I don't have to know the details to know that it was unpleasant."

She smiled then, and he saw that it was not at all a mocking smile. It was unexpectedly beautiful, the smile of a mother at her child. It confused him at first, for his feelings were not in the least filial. Then he saw that the Martian had come into the room and was asking softly, "Anything else?"

The Martian had a gentle tinkling voice, like hers. She shook her head, and he withdrew, closing the door.

She said, "Sit down, Mr. Lawson. You are not going to find this easy to listen to."

"Trotter is dead?"

"Trotter has not been killed. Sit down."

He sat, a sense of relief flooding him. Trotter was alive, he himself would be able to kill the man after all. She said thoughtfully, "You must try to be patient, Mr. Lawson, even though you will feel that you have been cheated of your revenge."

He asked sharply, "Who told you that I wanted revenge?"

"Trotter. Of course he himself didn't realize it, but his mind contained the record of what happened five years ago, and in view of what I had already seen of you, I had no difficulty in interpreting your attitude. Yours, Mr. Lawson, is a mind poisoned by the vicious desire to inflict torture and death. You are not quite sane."

"You yourself want revenge, Dr. Lo-Mran."

"But I do not lull myself to sleep with thoughts of torture. My ideas of revenge are different from your own." She smiled at him, and again it was that beatific smile of a mother at her child, and this time he was more confused than before, for the Martian was not in the room, and there was no question that the smile was meant for him. "Trotter killed my sons. I wanted them back."

IT MUST be her maternal feelings, he thought, diffused towards young people generally, now that they could no longer be directed at her own sons. Aloud, he said, "Research has done wonders. It hasn't succeeded yet in reviving the dead."

"Not in reviving the dead, no. Still, as you say, it has done wonders. I know, Mr. Lawson, because I myself have performed so many experiments and obtained so many results that others have been pleased to call wonders. Did you know that I have a laboratory in the rear of my house?"

"I thought that you were a doctor of medicine."

"No, of research. What you Earth people would call a Ph.D. I have specialized in physiology and psychology. I have always been amazed at what can be done with the animal body. Of course we Martians have always been further advanced in this field of science than you Earth people. You have tended to emphasize the physical sciences. You have taken inanimate matter and changed it in marvellous ways. You have created

the deadliest of weapons, and the most breathtaking of vessels for space flight.

"But you are not so skilled in the treatment of organic matter. And it is there that our own skill lies. It is true that Martian life is especially adaptable, but the methods we apply to it are no less applicable to Earth animals. Do you know that I have taken a dog from Earth and by slow and careful alteration of its physical structure changed it into what any one would consider a Martian porog?"

"At heart, however, it would still be a dog."

"No, for I have also altered its brain structure and its psychic processes at the same time. In some of its internal organs, and in a few of its physiological reactions, it remains a dog. Otherwise it is a porog. It deems itself one, and is accepted as one by other porogs."

Lawson said hoarsely, "So that's what you've done to Trotter. You've changed him."

"I have changed him."

"That's murder," he snarled, and his eyes blazed with anger and with the desperation that came from knowing that now he would never be revenged. "You haven't destroyed the spark of life, but you've destroyed the man. Trotter as an individual is dead, even though another mind lives in his body. And that's murder."

"No. It is revenge. Revenge as a sensible person would see it."

"You talk of my mind being poisoned. You're worse than I am! I'd have made him suffer, eventually killed him—but when he died he'd still have been John Trotter—he'd still have been himself. You've done the worst thing possible. You've robbed him of everything—of his mind, his individuality. You've taken his body and given it to some one else. And you've robbed me too, do you understand? You've robbed *me!*"

"Shout if it pleases you. But do not shout nonsense. I have robbed you of nothing but the poison you nourished in your bosom."

He leaped to his feet, trembling. Now his hate for her surpassed even the hatred he had so long cherished for Trotter. He cried, "You'll be punished for this!"

"Punished for destroying the mind of a murderer? Punished for taking an evil, worthless criminal and converting him into a useful member of society?"

"Punished for what you've done to me," he raved. "And I'll do the punishing, I'll pay you back. The tortures, the deaths that I was saving for him—they'll all be yours. You'll suffer as he was meant to, as I'm suffering now."

"The poison has eaten deep," she said sadly. She rose from her chair and stood there facing him, tiny even when standing, but as dignified as ever, with a dignity that even his half-crazed mind could appreciate. "I have told you what sort of revenge I wanted. I had two sons, and then Trotter killed them. I wanted them back. Now I already have one."

"You have one?"

"The man who let you into the house. He was Trotter. He is now my son. He thinks that he has always been my son."

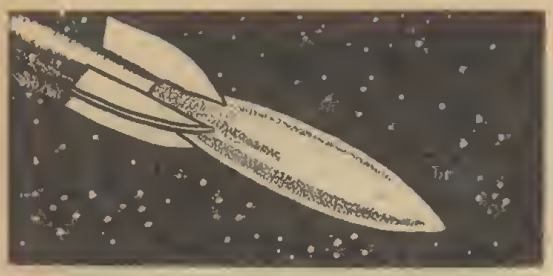
"He thinks—?"

"And so," she added softly, "will you."

An almost invisible cloud descended from one of the jars on the ceiling and wrapped itself around him. He choked and fell. Even as his eyes closed, he could hear her say, "My darling boy."

His last confused thought was that they would be brothers now. They would be brothers, and the woman whose sons had been killed would be their mother—and then he fell into the deep slumber of Dr. Lo-Mran's revenge. . . .

Read THE CAPHIAN CAPER, by Kendell Foster Crossen, in the December THRILLING WONDER STORIES—25c at All Stands!



by
NORMAN B. WILTSEY

The Rocket in Warfare

THE "wily" Chinese invented the powder rocket somewhere around 1200 A.D. and gave invading Mongols fits with their new weapon at the siege of the city of Kai-fung-fu in 1232. The Mongols called the rockets "arrows of flying fire," after the real fire-arrow shot from bows. Drawings of rocket-arrow combinations found in ancient Chinese manuscripts indicate that the Mongols were correct in their description.

The Chinese also dropped powder bombs on the heads of the attackers, and eventually the Mongols got so sick of the whole noisy business they mounted their shaggy ponies and rode off in disgust.

News of the Chinese powder rocket soon reached the West, and in 1240 an Arab scientist known as Ibn Albaithar (Son of the Horse Doctor) wrote a book about it.

Forty years later, another Arab set forth precise recipes for making gunpowder and rockets in his book *Fighting On Horseback and with War Engines.* This writer, one Hasson Alrammah, calls the rockets Chinese Arrows.

European Rockets

Rockets appeared in Europe about the year 1250, although little mention of them appears in the history of warfare until the year 1379. In that year the Italian historian Muratori states that rockets were effectively used in a battle for the Isle of Chiozzi. One strong point, a lofty tower manned by archers and arquebusiers, held up the attack for hours until set afire by a direct rocket hit.

In the early 1400's, German and Italian military engineers began designing improved war rockets for use on European battlefields. Thereafter, until about the year 1500, it was touch and go as to whether rockets or the crude cannon of the period would win out as the major weapon. Cannon won the race, and rockets were discarded for warfare until the late 1700's.

In 1780, India's powerful Prince Hyder Ali of Mysore, trained a special rocket corps for his army. Hyder Ali's rocket artillery numbered 1200 men, firing rockets weighing six to twelve pounds up to a range of a mile and a half.

For nineteen years of sporadic warfare (1780-1799) the Prince and his son Tippoo Sahib showed the tough regulars of the British Army a "ruddy 'ard time" with this "new" weapon. At the battle of Seringapatam a single rocket wiped out half a platoon. Other rockets threw an English cavalry charge into complete

The Story of Eight Centuries of Rocketeering!

confusion when the horses panicked at the fiery rain of hissing missiles.

British Experiments

After the stubborn war in India was successfully concluded, the British military authorities started rocket experimentation on their own. William Congreve developed the first English war rockets in 1805—thirty pound missiles loaded with incendiary mixtures. Initial tests against a French gunboat flotilla anchored at Boulogne proved pretty much of a flop. Napoleon Bonaparte had a hearty laugh at the foolish Englishmen.

In the following year, however, Congreve hit upon the bright idea of launching his rockets in salvos and in this manner destroyed much of Boulogne in a spectacular attack from the sea. Napoleon's laughter stuck in his throat after that British *coup*, and the Little Corporal started fooling with rockets himself.

In 1807 the British Navy poured a terrific barrage of 25,000 rockets into Copenhagen. The terrified inhabitants fled in panic from the "shower of fire" from the skies, and the city was almost completely burned.

In August, 1814, United States military forces encountered the awesome British weapon for the first time. The English invading force of 4500 men, including a rocket company, landed on the shores of Chesapeake Bay. A larger force of American militia opposed the landing, and the rifle-toting civilian soldiers did all right until the enemy started throwing rockets in bunches. Two American regiments broke and ran, and the battle was lost. The British marched on Washington and burned the national capitol to the ground.

An Anthem Is Born

Three weeks later the triumphant invaders attacked Fort McHenry, defending the city of Baltimore. Rockets again were used, but this time failed to accomplish anything significant except to inspire poet Francis Scott Key, a prisoner aboard an English man-of-war in the harbor, to write the *Star Spangled Banner*.

Not many years after the Battle of Fort McHenry, the invention of long-range rifled cannon made the rocket obsolete as a weapon of war. Not until World War II produced the British "Z" gun, the German "Nebelwerfer" and the Russian "Katusha," did the rocket launcher come into its own as a modern instrument of destruction.

Later in the same conflict the German V-1 and V-2 rockets came perilously close to turning the tide of war in favor of the hard-pressed Nazis. Luckily for England and America, Hitler's brilliant rocket engineers didn't get to work soon enough to achieve their bloody goal.

Curt Temple pits his slim Earth knowledge against the most perfect intelligence in the cosmos to save the world—and the woman he loves. Be sure to read THE GODS HATE KANSAS, a novel by JOSEPH J. MILLARD in November

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A NOVELET

Get Along Little Unicorn

By KENDELL FOSTER CROSSEN

HAVING nothing else to do for the moment, Oliver Greshold took a good look at himself and was pleased. He was the youngest Commissioner on Terra and, so far as the future was concerned, the galaxy was his oyster.

His office, on the 120th floor of the Terran Commissions Building in Nyork, was large enough to have contained a small family unit, and was luxuriously appointed. In one wall there was a mirror stretching from ceiling to floor, with

Greshold knew he was a good match for the Centaur.

But even the brightest match burns briefly. . . .

concealed lighting so that Commissioner Oliver Greshold could flip a switch and see how he looked seated at his desk. He did so, in conclusion of this latest self-inventory, and the image in the mirror smiled back at him with approval.

He smoothed his hair, noting with satisfaction the signs of premature gray, and switched off the light. The sight of himself had, by a natural chain of logic, suggested the thought of seeing if his secretary was free for dinner. He had, however, begun a small debate with himself as to whether he should first ask the secretary or phone his wife and explain that he had to work late. This debate was still in process when he heard the shriek from the outer office. Since ordinary sounds never carried beyond his door, this shrill scream could only denote an emergency. Oliver raced across his office and flung open the door.

He found himself staring at the rear end of a horse.

Now horses were no longer a common sight on Terra; they were so uncommon, in fact, that Oliver Greshold stared for several seconds before he could even attach a name to the object holding his gaze. But then he found the memory and his voice at the same time.

"Who brought a horse into this office?" he demanded.

"Who," demanded an equally masculine voice, "are you calling a horse?"

There was a clatter of four feet on the office floor and Oliver found himself staring into the face of a man. Or, he corrected himself, at least part of a man. It was a man's head and face, with a full, curly, brown beard. It was a man's shoulders, arms, chest and even waist. But beyond the waist it became the body of a horse. As though to make the matter more confusing, the man-part was wearing some sort of huge, ridiculous hat, a bright red shirt with a yellow neckerchief knotted, and around his waist, just above where the horse-part began, there was a wide leather belt with long leather pockets on either side. In the pockets were stuffed two instruments which slightly resembled primitive energy-guns.

It had taken Oliver several seconds to recall the name of horse; it took him just as long to realize that this was a Centaur.*

"I'm sorry, Mr. Greshold," his secretary said. "It—he frightened me and I'm afraid I screamed."

"You're Mr. Greshold?" the Centaur asked. His frown had been replaced with a cheerful smile. "Then you are just the Lord of the Universe I wish to see."

Oliver Greshold was only human and so found some enjoyment in being called a Lord of the Universe—a term which other races had once been encouraged to apply to Terrans—but he was also aware that Terran officials were now supposed to discourage it. He was about to make his position clear when his secretary interrupted again.

"Mr. Greshold," she said, "there's a call for you. On the restricted circuit."

GRESHOLD looked at the Centaur. "I'll be with you in a moment. I hope you don't mind waiting." He didn't linger to find out if the Centaur did mind, closed the door and hurried over to his official visiscreen. He snapped it on and a moment later was in visiconference with Morton Alonsa, a Vice-president of the Federation and Chairman of the powerful Ways and Means Committee†.

"How are you, Oliver?" the Vice-president said. He was obviously in a good humor. "Where were you—out flirting with that pretty secretary again?"

"No," Oliver said. "In fact, when

*Centaurs ceased being myths to Terrans as soon as the first space ships reached Alpha Centauri, but very few of them had been seen on Terra. A number of them did visit during the first few years of space travel, but they were constantly plagued by Terrans who wanted to ride them. As a result, they soon stopped their visits. In the following years, the novelty of the Centaurs had faded with the discovery of even more startling races, so it is not surprising that Oliver Greshold did not immediately realize the identity of his visitor.

†It was a Bellatrixian wit who said, "Whenever Terra wants to exploit a weaker member of the Federation, you can be sure that Alonsa will find the Ways and Means of doing it." The following day the Bellatrixian Representative offered Terra an apology in the Federation Congress. The apology was graciously accepted.

you called, I was standing in the doorway wondering why a Centaur wanted to see me."

"A Centaur?" The veep looked startled. "What's one of them doing on Terra? You know, they're the most uncooperative race in the galaxy. And troublemakers. Only the other day their representative accused Terra of being totalitarian and refused to explain what he meant. The whole proceedings were held up for a half hour until we could find an ancient Terran dictionary. Oh, well, I expect you'll handle whatever the fellow wants."

"I expect I will," Oliver said grimly. "What's up, Morton?"

"Some more good news. Congress just declared Arcturus a Class D system, so you've got four new planets under your wing*. Three of them, I understand, are not inhabited. However, I imagine that we can reclaim them."

"Arcturus?" said Oliver. "I don't believe I'm familiar with that system."

"You will be, Oliver. I understand from the secret report I ordered that there are no valuable resources on the planets at all. But we can turn them into tourist stations—that's been proving more valuable than metals anyway."

Oliver nodded. "What sort of race dominates on the one planet?"

"Human." The veep grinned at Oliver's surprise. "Yes, *homa sapiens,* but about ten thousand years behind us. It'll take them a long time to reach an A classification. . . . Let me know what you need."

"What about the other life forms on the planet? Any of them intelligent?"

"No mention of it on the report, so I guess they're not. I'm sending you a facsimile copy of the report. Happy dividends, Oliver." His image faded from the screen.

*It was in 3150 that the Smith-Cioppa Guardian Act was passed by Congress, permitting planets in Class D systems to become the wards of any major power in the galaxy. Certain restrictions in the bill, however, plus Terra's strong bloc in Congress, led to most of them passing into the guardianship of Terra—and thus under the control of the Department of Wards of Terra, of which Oliver Greshold was the Commissioner. In return for assisting backward planets to a Class A status, the guardian-planet received a complete industrial monopoly on the ward during the term of the trusteeship.

The mere mention of dividends brought a romantic glow to Oliver Greshold. Happy dividends had, indeed, been the password between him and the Vice-president ever since Oliver had come up with the tourist idea. Before Oliver, the Commissioner of Wards and the Vice-president from Terra had always done well by themselves in the matter of freight lines and various concessions on the ward-planets which were rich in ore, but there had been many planets which had to be passed up. With the coming of Oliver all this had changed.

It had been sheer inspiration, Oliver thought to himself. And yet so simple. Now Terra assumed guardianship over all those planets which seemed worthless—a fact which made excellent propaganda throughout the galaxy—and turned them into Terran Historical Museums. Each planet was made an exact replica of some period in Terra's history, with the dominant race dressed in the fashion of humans of that period. Thus, Beta Hydri II was Elizabethan England while Shaula III was ancient Rome. Since these were Terran museums, all costs were borne by the government. Not only were these planets visited by tourists from all over the galaxy, but Terrans, being sentimental about their past, went in droves. In the meantime, Vice-president Alonsa and Commissioner Greshold, under various trade names, owned the space lines which made the tours and sold the food and drink concessions. It added up to a tidy sum.

OLIVER reluctantly pulled his thoughts away from his bank accounts and remembered that there was someone waiting to see him. He pressed the button which would signal his secretary to send the visitor in and settled himself in his most executive pose.

The door opened and the Centaur came in, flipping the door shut with a hand hoof. He came across the room and stood in front of the desk.

"Sorry to keep you waiting so long," Oliver said briskly. He was about to ask

him to have a chair when he realized there was nothing in the office which could serve as a chair for a horse. He wasn't even sure that Centaurs did sit down. He cleared his throat to cover the fact that he'd started to say something else.

"It was nothing, Lord of the Universe," the Centaur said.

"None of that," Oliver said firmly. "We Terrans do not consider ourselves the lords of the universe, but only the equals of other advanced races in the galaxy." This diplomatic lie, he realized, was essential to interplanetary goodwill, but it was also well not to encourage too much familiarity. "Just a simple Sir, or Mr. Greshold, will do here. Now, what can I do for you, my good—ah—fellow?"

"First, my card, sir." The Centaur reached into his shirt and produced a rectangular piece of stiff paper which he placed on the desk. Oliver glanced down and read:

J. Ixion Chiron
Impresario
Qui transtulit sustinet

"Impresario?" Oliver said, looking up from the card. "I don't recall that as an accepted professional category. . . ."

"I'm a promoter," the Centaur explained. "You'll have to pardon me, sir, but the word 'impresario' is one of your ancient words. I've always been a student and admirer of Terran history."

"Oh, yes. . . . And this other bit here—I suppose it is something in your native dialect?"

"No, that is also from Terra. An ancient language known as Latin. The expression means 'He who transplanted, sustains.' You might say that I've taken it as my motto since I so seldom get back to Alpha Centauri."

"Quite so," Oliver said amiably. He supposed that a certain amount of hero-worship of Terra was to be expected. "Just what is your business—ah—Chiron?" It seemed hardly proper to use "Mister" in addressing someone who was half horse.

"I have a proposition in mind," J. Ixion Chiron said, "whereby we both might make a bit of a profit."

"There's no minking* in this office," Oliver said sternly.

"No, no," Chiron protested. "I meant a simple business proposition. Surely that's not amiss."

"Well, no—"

"You know, I've visited the planets you've turned into Terran shrines and I doubt if there's anything more beautiful in the entire galaxy. The idea, sir, was sheer genius."

Somewhat mollified, Oliver decided to hear the Centaur out rather than terminate the interview swiftly, as he'd intended.

"And now," continued Chiron, "you've taken over the custody of Arcturus."

Oliver was startled, a rare reaction in him. He knew that Morton Alonsa had called him the minute the guardianship was established, yet the Centaur had already been in the outer office apparently in possession of the knowledge.

"How did you know that?" he demanded.

Chiron smiled and seemed to be inspecting one polished hoof. "Oh, I have my ways," he said. "The point is, Lord of the Uni— Mr. Greshold, that I am quite familiar with Arcturus One, the planet which will lend itself most quickly to being—er—developed. I believe I might be of some small assistance."

"I'm sorry," Oliver said coldly. "I see no reason why Arcturus should be handled differently than other historical shrines. Now, I'm afraid I'm rather busy—"

"Of course," the Centaur interrupted blandly, "I don't expect to profit personally from the usual operations, such as the space line charter and the normal concessions. But suppose I show you a way of adding a number of new enterprises, including a legitimate reason for charging each tourist an admission fee

*Although the use of the word *minking*—i. e. the bribery of government officials—has been traced back as far as late in the 20th Century, students of semantics have been unable to determine its origin so it is presumed that it referred to some primitive local custom.

to Arcturus One? I should imagine about twenty-five credits per individual."

OLIVER'S attitude did another quick flip-over. He knew that the annual quota of tourists was well up into the billions and he needed no multiplication to tell him that a twenty-five credit fee would return a very pretty figure. He had, in fact, often tried to think of some way of charging such admission.

"I'm afraid an admission charge is out of the question," he explained, wondering if Chiron really had a solution to the problem. "The government of Terra pays all the cost of converting such planets into replicas of Terran periods in history. Such an arrangement is possible only so long as the results are free to observers. The only way we could charge an admission fee would be to take over the development, and the cost is prohibitive to private funds."

"But suppose that your government turned Arcturus into an authentic Terran period and then afterwards a private company made certain additions which afforded the tourists constant entertainment as well as the educational view. Would it not be proper for the private company to charge an admission fee to cover the entertainment?"

"It would," Oliver admitted. "What is your idea?"

The Centaur reached into one of his pockets and there was an audible click. "You don't mind," he asked, "if I record the remainder of our conversation?"

"No," Oliver said sourly. He cursed to himself. Some of these extra-terrestrials were getting entirely too clever.

"It isn't that I don't trust you," Chiron said hastily, "but one never knows what changes may take place in government bureaus, and the next man might not be so honest as yourself. It is just a matter of good business. You understand, sir?"

"Of course," said Oliver, who understood only too well.

"First," Chiron said, "I imagine that you haven't had the opportunity of studying the planet in question. It is of about the size and condition of Terra. There is, however, a large arctic ice cap at one pole and the other pole is tropical. As a result the majority of the planet is constantly swept with hurricanes. This has resulted in keeping the human population down to a minimum."

"Not advanced enough to provide themselves with adequate shelter?" Oliver found himself becoming interested.

"Right. In fact, I believe that was a major point in giving the planet a D classification." For some reason, this seemed to amuse the Centaur. "But, of course, Terran science can soon melt the ice cap and adjust the storm area."

Oliver nodded.

"Most of the surface of the planet is low, rolling fields—rather pleasant if you care for that sort of thing. There are spots of forests, but they are sufficiently scattered so as not to interfere with what I have in mind. A rather simple, pastoral existence is carried on by the humans there—they even do their plowing by hand—so that a small amount of modern equipment and a few Terrans to run it would ensure the standard of living they need."

"Too backward even to learn how to operate the machinery, eh?" Oliver said. While hiring Terrans to work on the planet would increase the cost of the operation, he was rather pleased. A people that backward would not be apt to cause trouble over any of the arrangements. "There are other forms of life on the planet?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. But you might say they haven't been domesticated."

"I see. . . . Now what period of Terran history did you have in mind?"

"The Wild West," Chiron said.

"The Wild West?" Oliver repeated. The truth of the matter was that Oliver Greshold held historical knowledge in very low esteem, yet he liked to give the impression that he knew all about such

things. He ran over the memory of those periods he'd had to cover but could think of nothing that seemed to fit. "Let me see—the Wild West—approximately—"

"You're quite right," the Centaur said hastily. "It was a period mostly confined to a part of Terra known as America, during the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. It was a rather colorful period lasting during the reigns of three kings—Cassidy, Rogers and Autry*."

OF COURSE," Oliver said heartily. "A very colorful period."

"Exactly. The humans of that period wore costumes somewhat like these I have on. They seem to have spent all of their time riding horses and throwing ropes at a special breed of cattle called dogies."

"I'd wondered about the costume," Oliver confessed. He pointed to the two objects in the leather pockets. "And those?"

"They were called six-shooters." Chiron removed one of the objects and looked at it with amusement. "A primitive sort of projectile weapon. I believe there was some method of combustion which forced the projectile on its way. As innocent as it sounds, I believe there were a number of fatalities."

"Ah, yes, guns. I know about them," Oliver said truthfully. "I don't believe we should go that far with authenticity. There might be repercussions."

"I can't imagine from whom," the Centaur said innocently. "Still, I don't suppose it's important. We can dress the Arcturus humans up in the fashion of the Wild West humans—cowboys, they were called—and there are a number of local animals which can also be used."

Oliver nodded. It did sound like a good idea. "However," he said firmly, "I'm afraid that you have offered nothing that would justify an admission fee—or your participation."

"I'm coming to that. Your Terrans of that period went in for something which they called rodeos. They rode horses which tried to throw them off, threw ropes at dogies and wrestled other animals with long horns, and in general carried on in a rather simple-minded fashion which the sophisticated races of the galaxy would find very amusing. By training the Arcturusians—which I would do, of course—we could provide almost continuous entertainment."

Oliver nodded reluctantly. "An admission fee of twenty-five credits would not be exorbitant," he admitted.

"I also believe," continued Chiron, "that we could promote the fashion of wearing Wild West clothes when visiting Arcturus. They can be manufactured in a variety of bright colors for both males and females. We would manufacture these ourselves, with suitable outlets on all the major worlds of the galaxy."

"Yes, yes," Oliver said.

"Then there is the small matter of renting suitable steeds to the tourists once they are on Arcturus. Of course, there are very few horses left in the universe, but we can bring in a variety of other animals which will serve just as well."

Oliver found himself nodding again.

"Finally," said Chiron, "we'll start a visiscreen show built around a thrilling character of the Wild West. Properly handled, this will enable us to sell Wild West costumes to the billions who can't afford a vacation on Arcturus but can afford that much. Perhaps we might aim this at the younger citizens of the galaxy."

For a moment something like admiration glinted in the eyes of Oliver Greshold, but he quickly got a grip on himself. "That might be rather costly," he said cautiously.

"Nonsense," said the Centaur. . . . "It might be rather expensive if we had to scour the universe for a horse and

*In fairness to Oliver Greshold, it should be pointed out that J. Ixion Chiron had known nothing of the Wild West until forty-eight hours earlier when he'd made a hasty visit to the encyclotape room of the public library. As the result of cramming, he was in error on a few small points, but only the most pedantic could be expected to know this.

then also hire an actor, but we can cut the budget in half immediately. I will personally play the parts of both the Wild West hero and his trusty horse—I think, perhaps, we might even call the program Trotalong Chiron. I may say, even in modesty, that I would cut a dashing figure."

AS THOUGH to emphasize this, the Centaur reared up, with front feet flailing the air, while he swept off his hat. It was impressive, although Oliver worried more about what his hoofs might do to the rug.

"Yes, yes," he said hurriedly. "I can see where you might have a certain popular appeal."

"Then, too," said Chiron, the desk shaking as he dropped his forefeet to the floor, "additional tourists would be sure to make Arcturus part of their schedule since every rodeo would include a personal appearance of that famous visiscreen star, Trotalong Chiron."

"Well, you may have something," Oliver said carefully, knowing very well that he did. "I'd like to think about it, if you don't mind. Suppose you drop in and see me some time tomorrow."

"You'll never regret it, partner," Chiron said. "We'll rope the tenderfeet in by the billions."

Wondering what tender feet had to do with it, Oliver nodded stiffly and waited until the Centaur had clattered out of the office. Then he put in a call to his friend, the veep.

"Yes," Alonsa said when Oliver finished explaining, "that seems to be very sound. The return should be high. It's too bad you didn't think of it yourself."

"I would have," Oliver said defensively, "but I haven't gotten up as far as the Eighteenth Century yet. I was wondering—while it's true that the Centaur made a recording of the conversation, couldn't we claim we've been thinking of the idea for some time? After all, it would only be his word against mine and surely my word is better than that of a —than a half a man's."

"Normally, yes," the veep said. "But the representative from Alpha Centauri, backed by a number of others, has been making such a fuss about what he calls Terran exploitation of other races that I don't think we'd better risk it just now. You can, however, point out various reasons why he should take a small percentage and perhaps even arrange for us to re-invest his share for him. You take care of it, Oliver. I have every confidence in you."

The responsibility thus placed squarely upon his own shoulders, Oliver Greshold soon worried himself into such a state of confusion that he told his secretary he'd be back late and took his wife out to dinner. This was upsetting, but by the following day he'd concocted a story which apparently satisfied the secretary and was his usual urbane self when the Centaur was shown in.

After considerable haggling, during which Oliver dramatically demonstrated that the Centaur was making a pauper of him, they agreed on terms which gave Chiron twenty-five per cent of the various enterprises concerning Arcturus. But despite Oliver's best efforts, the Centaur would not agree to the re-investment plan.

"No, no," he said firmly. "I'm a creature of simple tastes. I have no desire to possess great wealth—just a few little trinkets to comfort me in my old age. So we'll arrange for my percentage to be deposited in the bank on Alpha Centauri as soon as it comes in."

And that's the way it was agreed. Finally all of the papers were properly drawn, signed and witnessed, and the exhausted Oliver Greshold was left alone with a slightly damaged rug in an office where a faint horse-smell still lingered.

IN THE DAYS which followed, however, Oliver was forced to admit that for once he and Alonsa had done well in the choice of a partner.

J. Ixion Chiron saw to the establishment of factories, supervised the Terran engineers on Arcturus, checked all the

tourist ads, and was, in fact, a veritable whirlwind of activity*. Once a week, he spaced into Terra to make the visiscreen films of the thrilling episodes in the life of Trotalong Chiron.

Within a month after Arcturus was opened, Oliver and Alonsa had even more cause to rejoice. In spite of the twenty-five credit admission charge, more tourists visited Arcturus than all the other planet-museums combined. Some seventeen million tourists, ten million of them from Terra, planked down the twenty-five credits, plus several hundred credits each in order to be properly outfitted. In fact, the sale of Wild West costumes threatened to become one of the largest industries in the galaxy. In the meantime, every visiscreen network in the universe was carrying the adventures of Trotalong Chiron and orders were pouring in. And they were getting royalties from Trotalong Chiron Dolls, Trotalong Chiron Breakfast Food, and had just signed a contract for Trotalong Chiron Mating Whistles which were to be sold on Denebola II†.

It was in the third or fourth month, with the money still pouring in, that Oliver Greshold began to think about visiting Arcturus himself. He'd never before had the slightest desire to see any of the worlds under his control. The new urge was partly due to the fact that he had taken one of the Wild West costumes home and tried it on. He was convinced that he looked rather dashing in it.

It was perhaps another month before Oliver felt that he could safely leave the reins of the department in the hands of his assistant. Then he invited a dozen of his friends to be his guests for a week and arranged that no tourists be permitted on Arcturus during that week.

Chiron had been notified of the exact time of their arrival so that a suitable reception could be planned. Oliver Greshold's private space yacht dropped through the atmosphere of Arcturus and landed on the field precisely at the time Oliver had said it would.

As the outer lock of the space yacht opened, the passengers could hear strange explosive sounds and the thunder of running hoofs. At first they were frightened, but Oliver reassured them and they all crowded out of the ship.

THE FIELD around the ship was a whirlpool of color as several hundred cowboys and cowgirls galloped and shouted and fired their six-shooters. In the vanguard, wearing a magenta sombrero and a yellow silk shirt, and with a silver-mounted saddle on his back, was Trotalong Chiron. The cowboys and cowgirls streaming behind him were, of course, humans. They were mounted on lumbering, six-legged Arcturusian animals, but since the visitors were totally unfamiliar with horses the picture seemed quite authentic and touching. One man, in fact—a prominent Terran politician—wept silent tears for the glory that once was Terra's.

Trotalong Chiron galloped to the front, swept off his hat and bowed.

"Howdy, boss," he called. "Welcome to the Bar Sinister Ranch."

"Thank you, Trotalong," Oliver said. He noticed that his visitors were visibly impressed and he was grateful to Chiron. He thought of asking about the name that the Centaur had apparently given the planet, but decided against it. Better not show that Chiron knew more about Terra's Wild West period than he did.

Mounts were soon found for Oliver and his guests from among those that were normally rented. As Chiron had already explained, there was not enough of the *Lukas*—the camel-like six-legged animals—to do more than provide mounts for the cowboys and cowgirls, but they had imported a number of animals which were suitable for riding. These ranged from the slender Alcyon-

*"He's a horse for work" was the way Oliver put it, a remark which was gleefully repeated around half the galaxy.

†The dominent race on Denebola II being descended from a variety of the subgenus *Asinus*, Trotalong Chiron had become especially popular among the Donebolan Jennies, as the females of the race are known. At last count, they had eight million Chiron Swoon Clubs.

ean elephants to Kochabian ostriches, all of them wearing highly-ornamental saddles and bridles. The guests were soon mounted and riding across the prairies of Arcturus.

Oliver, up on a Kochabian ostrich, rode at the head of the little group with Chiron trotting along beside him.

"Got a great week planned for you," Chiron said. "The works. These boys and girls on Arcturus may not be so smart in some ways, but they've picked up this Wild West stuff like they were born to it."

"Fine, fine," Oliver said. "I hope you don't mind the fact that I cancelled all tourist reservations for this week. We've been doing quite well and my friends are pretty important people."

"Not at all," the Centaur said. "It'll be a pleasure for us to perform for a high-class audience after a steady diet of tourists."

Oliver had been gazing about him as they rode along and he found the tremendous vistas of land, unbroken by any modern buildings, rather pleasant. As far as he could see, there were only hills and grass, with nothing moving but themselves.

"I meant to ask you," he said, "how you solved the problem of cattle. I don't imagine they had any here, did they?"

"*Kurens,*" Chiron said. He grinned at Oliver's expression. "A native animal, slightly smaller than the Terran cattle, with only one horn. They are unique to this planet, although there were once rumors of such animals on Terra. They were called unicorns and once were one of your myths—like centaurs." He grinned again.

Oliver nodded, although he'd never heard of unicorns. He pointed to the ground where they were passing.

"What are all those holes?" he asked. "Some sort of subterranean animal?"

"Yes. A species of prairie dog. They are known here as the Marmota, but they are evolved from something very similar to the prairie dogs on Terra. I believe they are mostly extinct now—that is, on Terra. They build regular communities underground. They're quite intelligent in their way."

"No doubt," said Oliver, who was privately of the opinion that only humans were really intelligent.

"Oh, Mr. Trotalong," cried one of the women in the party behind them. "I think I saw some sort of little animal wearing a hat!"

"A mirage, ma'am," the Centaur said in his most courtly manner. "A mere illusion caused by the peculiar light rays on this planet. I hope it didn't startle you."

"Oh, no. I thought it was very cute."

"We have the cutest mirages in the galaxy, if I do say so myself," Chiron answered.

Before long they reached the main ranch house and the guests were put up in comfortable cabins for the night.

EARLY the following morning, the entertainment began. Trotalong Chiron and his cowboys and cowgirls rode bucking *Lucas,* bulldogged unicorns, roped and tied unicorns, and performed all sorts of trick riding. Although many of the stunts seemed dangerous, no one was hurt. Not only were the Arcturusian humans skillful, but there seemed to be almost an affinity between them and the animals they rode or roped. Oliver remarked on this once when one of the cowboys stopped in the midst of bulldogging and appeared to be holding a conversation with the unicorn.

"They live and work and play with the animals," Chiron said, "so they naturally become very attached to them. A perfectly normal thing, I assure you." But afterwards, he went down and spoke sharply to the cowboy who had traded social amenities with the unicorn he was bulldogging.

The next several days passed pleasantly. Oliver and his guests rode out on the range, watched the mock branding ceremony and saw something that Chiron claimed was called a roundup. It was the fourth evening, as they were sitting

around an open fire, when Oliver had his big idea. He'd walked over to the small corral in which there were a number of unicorns. Without thinking of anything in particular, he'd reached through the rails and patted one of the animals on a well-fattened hip. Then the idea hit him. He called to Chiron. "What's up?" the Centaur asked, cantering over.

"Just had an idea which would round this trip out perfectly," Oliver said. "You know the one thing missing in this is the food. We've been eating food brought in from Terra instead of trying to eat as they did during the Wild West period." Oliver had also visited the library. "Now, there's still some time before dinner tonight. Let's have a beefsteak party."

"Say, that would have been a great idea," Chiron said. "It's too bad we didn't think of having some special steaks spaced in."

"No, that's not what I meant," Oliver explained. He reached through and patted the unicorn again. "We can make this seem like the real thing. Have your boys kill a couple of these and butcher them up quickly. I'll bet we'll have some fine steaks."

"I—I don't think they'd be good," Chiron said. His voice was suddenly unnecessarily loud.

"Of course, they're good. They'll make wonderful steaks. Now, tell your fellows to get to it."

"Let's not be hasty. It—they—that is, the cowboys are strictly vegetarian, you know. They—I told you they're very attached to the animals. I'm sure they wouldn't do it." There were beads of sweat on Chiron's brow.

"Nonsense," Oliver said briskly. "We're paying them, so they'll do what they're told to. If you have any trouble with them just explain that I'm Commissioner in charge of this planet and my orders are that they are to butcher a couple of these animals."

Even as he finished, Oliver was aware that J. Ixion Chiron was not really lis-

[*Turn page*]

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tening to him. His gaze seemed to be fixed at some point beyond the campfire and he shouted something in a language which Oliver could not understand. Then he spread his hands in a gesture of defeat.

There was an excited murmur from those around the campfire, and then Oliver saw a new figure come into the light, marching on past the fire directly toward them. Oliver blinked a couple of times to be sure that it wasn't a mirage.

The newcomer was no more than three feet tall. He wore a complete Wild West costume, even down to high-heeled boots and jangling spurs. But despite this, and the erect carriage, Oliver saw that he was non-humanoid. The face beneath the wide-brimmed sombrero was definitely rodent and he glimpsed a tail protruding from the back of the chaps. He had barely taken in these details when he realized that the rodent-face was screwed up in what could only be rage.

He strode across and stopped directly in front of Oliver Greshold. He tilted his head and squinted from beneath the sombrero. "Get out," he said in succinct Terran. "Get off this planet, all of you. Hit the road. Scram."

I BEG your pardon?" Oliver said with dignity. "I don't understand this intrusion, but I happen to be the Commissioner of Wards of Terra, and—"

"I don't care who you are," snapped the newcomer. "Get going or I'll drill you right where you stand."

Oliver noticed that the newcomer was wearing two of the ancient guns and that his paws were near them.

"I'm afraid he means it," Chiron said. "I believe he has his equipped with genuine ammunition."

"But—but who is this person?" Oliver asked, looking at Chiron in bewilderment.

"Forgive me for forgetting to introduce you," Chiron said ironically. "This is Ruma Amur, the duly elected president of Arcturus."

"You," Ruma Amur snapped at the

Centaur, "assured me that there would be no threats to any of our people. But these barbarians would have eaten the Kurens—and perhaps we Marmota too if they'd thought of it. Well, just for that everybody off!"

"Just a minute," Oliver said with all the dignity he could muster in the face of the bristling rodent. "I don't understand what this is all about, but I am in charge of this planet. If there are any orders to be given around here, I'll give them. Now, do I understand that you claim to be some sort of executive here, and that you were elected by the dominant race of this planet?"

"The Marmota are the dominant race of Arcturus. The Kurens, whom you wished to turn into some sort of beefsteaks, are the secondary race. I was elected by the votes of the Marmota and the Kurens, with, I might add, one of the largest pluralities in the history of Arcturus."

"But what about them?" Oliver asked, indicating the Arcturusian humans.

"Them?" Ruma Amur said in contempt. "They are work animals—or were until recently when we learned that they also have the capacity for entertaining. If the intelligent races of your world don't know enough to keep you in your place, that's their problem. Now, get."

Oliver Greshold looked about him. He noticed first that J. Ixion Chiron had vanished. Then, with alarm, he saw the unicorns crowding around, their single horns gleaming in the firelight. Beyond them, the Arcturusian humans moved up, fingering their six-shooters as though in answer to some command.

"Just a minute," Oliver said hastily. "Perhaps we can—"

"Stranger," Ruma Amur said omniously, "we've always had a nice, decent little planet here and we aim to keep it that way. I'll give you just ten seconds and at the end of that time you'd better be a-running. One—"

Oliver took one more look about the

[*Turn page*]

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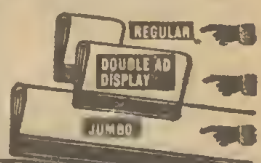

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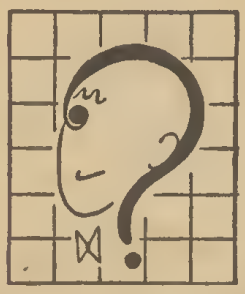

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campfire, correctly read the expressions on the faces of his guests, and led them in a retreat which took full advantage of the remaining nine seconds.

Back aboard his space yacht, Oliver set the course for Terra and then began angrily visiphoning a description of J. Ixion Chiron to the Galactic Police.

FORTY-EIGHT HOURS failed to abate the wrath of Oliver Greshold, so there was an unholy gleam in his eyes two days later when his secretary announced that there were two Galactic Patrolmen there with the Centaur in custody. He had them come right in.

J. Ixion Chiron did not look quite as downcast as Oliver had expected, when he entered the office between the two patrolmen. In fact, the expression on his face was rather jaunty.

"Howdy, partner," he drawled with a wicked grin. His Wild West costume was gone and the muscles across his chest rippled as he managed a salute in spite of his manacles.

"Chiron," Oliver said grimly, "there are so many charges against you that we'll just forget about you once you're locked away. But I'd just like to know what was the idea?"

"It *was* a peachy idea, wasn't it, Ollie?" the Centaur asked. He laughed as Oliver winced over the familiarity. "After all, we did make a rather tidy sum, my share of which is still fortunately on Alpha Centauri. I must admit, however, that I did a little better than you."

"Better?" Oliver asked in amazement. "But how? You had only twenty-five per cent."

"Oh, I picked up a little from the other end," Chiron said. "You see, your Federation investigators, being Terrans, made a small mistake when they went to Arcturus. As soon as they saw some humans, they jumped to the conclusion that they were the dominant race and so they didn't look any further. So they missed the Marmota, with their highly advanced underground civilization. I

might add that they also missed the fact that Arcturus is rich in titanium."

"Titanium?" Oliver repeated.

"Scads of it," Chiron said cheerfully. "While the Marmota are highly advanced in many ways, they had never done much industrially. I pointed out to President Amur that Terra could do much about bringing in machinery—if it was felt it was for Terra's benefit. Then, the Marmota had never before seen the entertainment possibilities in humans, so I arranged to hold the rodeos where the Marmota could watch—for a modest fee, of course. The Kurens and the Lucas agreed to play along."

"Do you mean," gasped Oliver, "that they paid you to watch the tourists who came there and that they considered this entertainment?"

"Very fine entertainment," Chiron said nodding. "I might say we packed them in. And to think this could have gone on if you had only not insisted on a beefsteak party. There is much to be said for vegetarianism."

"Well," Oliver said grimly, "I'll see to it that your gains do you no good."

He was interrupted by a call coming in on his restricted circuit. He threw a sonic-barrier across the room so Chiron couldn't eavesdrop and took the call. It was the veep, but an unhappier looking veep was never seen.

"Well, you certainly got us into trouble, Oliver," he said without wasting any preliminaries. "That Arcturus mess. The whole story has just been brought up before the Federation. The Marmota —or whatever they call themselves— had no trouble in proving that since they were paying admission to watch our tourists who paid an admission to see Arcturus they were operating on as high a level as we were. Since they also offered other proof of being advanced, nothing could be done but reclassify them as an A planet. And I'm afraid they've already made an agreement with Vega and Sirius on their titanium—of which they seem to have a wealth. It's tough."

[*Turn page*]

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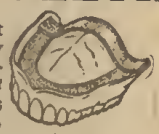

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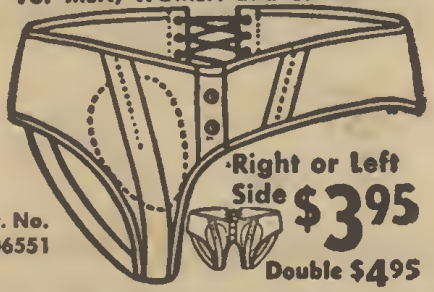

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"Well, there's one consolation," Oliver said. "I've got that Centaur."

"No, you haven't," the veep interrupted sadly. "The Marmota have hailed J. Ixion Chiron as a hero. The representative from Alpha Centauri has demanded that all charges against Chiron be dropped and that Terra guarantee his safety. This story has made Terra such a laughing-stock throughout the galaxy that he had no trouble swinging every other representative back of him. The guarantee of safety was just given."

For once Oliver Greshold was mute.

"Oliver," the veep said, "I'm afraid also that you and . have to resign. It's the only thing that can save some dignity for Terra. And you'd better think of some sort of work you can do."

"Work?" croaked Oliver.

The veep nodded. "They are now debating the question of confiscating our personal wealth. I'm very much afraid that the motion will pass."

After a moment, Oliver managed to lift the sonic barrier. He needed only a glance to tell that once more the Centaur knew or guessed what he'd just heard.

"You were about to say?"

"Nothing," Oliver said dully. He nodded to the two patrolmen. "You may let him go. Charges dropped."

The patrolman removed the manacles.

"It's really very kind of you," Chiron murmured. He switched his tail in appreciation. "By the way, Ollie, I'm a fairly rich individual now and I'm thinking of retiring back on Alpha Centauri. I expect I should think of living in keeping with my new status. During our short association, I confess I've grown rather fond of you. If you'd care to apply for the position of my valet—I believe it was called stable boy in the Wild West period on Terra—I'd be happy to consider you."

Oliver stared dumbly at him.

"Well, think it over," Chiron said. Then he leaned over and thoughtfully switched on the wall mirror for Oliver before leaving at a brisk trot.

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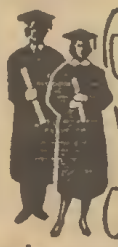

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